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HUCKLEBERRY THE FOOT HILLS DETECTIVE



OR,

The RIVAL RANCHMEN.

A Romance of the Great Colorado
Ranges.

BY LIEUT. A. K. SIMS.

CHAPTER I.

A STOLEN INTERVIEW.

THE shadows of night lay heavily about the base of Pilot Rock. Further away, on the wide-reaching plains, where only buffalo-grass and stunted sage-brush flourished, the light of the waning moon had free sweep. Here, the knotty and gnarled cedars, that sprawled about the edge of the *arroyo*, interposed their ugly arms between the earth and the sky.

Pilot Rock lifted its beacon-like crown not far from a cluster of low buildings. Those buildings were the ranch-house, stables and sheds of the Garland Ranch.

Ten miles away, as the crow flies, a similar cluster of buildings squatted on the plains. The latter belonged to Colonel Miles Monckton.

Monckton and Garland were rival ranchmen:

"HUCKLEBERRY!" RESPONDED THE LITTLE MAN DRYLY, FROM HIS HIGH PERCH,
"AN' WHICH HIS FU'ST NAME IS JONAS!"

and their jealousies, quarrels and bickerings were constant subjects of discussion far and near.

It seemed unfortunate that their ranches should lie so near to each other. In the long-ago they had been friends and confidants; and in a spirit of friendship had selected ranches side by side. Now they were bitter enemies, and each heartily wished that a hundred miles, instead of a half-score, separated them.

There were two persons, however, who did not share this spirit—who, in fact, wished that the intervening miles were only rods. One of these was Paul Monckton, Miles Monckton's only son. The other was John Garland's only daughter, Gladys.

The muffled beat of a horse's hoofs came from the depths of the arroya. Then the jingle of spurs. A horseman swung out of the deep saddle, lariat the pony to a cedar and advanced toward the base of the rock.

A bar of moonlight, sifting between the tree-boughs, revealed him as a broad-shouldered, stalwart and handsome young man. He was dressed in cowboy fashion yet there was nothing slovenly or uncouth about him. He had removed the hideous "shaps," or leggings, from his limbs, on dismounting, and strung them across the saddle. They were well enough for rough work, and riding through a brush country, but he did not consider them especially becoming.

Otherwise he was a typical cowboy, in typical cowboy attire.

As he neared the rock he caught the flutter of a white dress, and hastened his footsteps.

The young girl—for even in the darkness it could be seen that the wearer of the white dress was young and beautiful—bent forward in a listening attitude. She evidently recognized the advancing footsteps, for she arose with a glad cry and hurried toward the young man.

"Oh, Paul, I am so glad you have come!"

She took both his hands in hers, as she said this, and strove to read the expression on his handsome, manly face.

For answer he took her in his strong arms and showered her face with burning and rapturous kisses.

"Feared I might not get here, eh?" as he led her to the seat she had just vacated. "Well, it did look a little that way for awhile. I was watched like a hawk!"

"No! only it's so lonesome out here. Do you know, Paul, I have been waiting for nearly an hour? Every minute I feared father would discover my absence and come in search of me."

"I know I am late, Gladys!" the young man replied. "But, as I said, I feared I was watched, and had to use caution. My sudden return from the mountains without his consent, made father suspicious; especially so when he knew you had just reached home."

A year before Colonel Monckton and John Garland became aware that a feeling stronger than friendship was growing in the hearts of these young people. This feeling they determined to stamp out in its incipency. John Garland sent his daughter away to an Eastern boarding-school; and Monckton banished his son to a ranch in the mountains.

But distance can no more sever true love than can bolts and bars. In spite of the watchfulness of the principal of the young lady's seminary, and of the wild isolation of that mountain ranch, Gladys Garland and Paul Monckton had kept up a correspondence throughout the entire year.

They did not intend to show unfilial disrespect; but they not unnaturally felt that the foolish enmity existing between their fathers ought not to be allowed to estrange their love and mar their lives.

When the year expired, Gladys returned home—and Paul suddenly came back from the mountains. The latter had a suspicious look, and Colonel Monckton determined to keep a close watch upon the movements of his son while he remained at the home ranch. Thus it came about that Paul nearly failed in keeping his present engagement.

"Do you suppose it's wicked, Paul? This deception weighs on me. Father thinks I am in my own room now, and he is so good to me, Paul. Only in that. When your name is mentioned, he becomes so hard and bitter, that I can scarcely realize that he is my father."

There were tears in her voice, as well as in her eyes, as she said this.

"Gabe Taylor is at the bottom of it all!" Paul exclaimed, almost harshly. "Father is so blind though that he cannot see it. He seems to think that fellow a paragon of perfection. Before Taylor came here my father and yours were the very best of friends. His coming was like the coming of the serpent into Eden. Everything was changed."

"At first there was a little trouble over stock. This increased. Cattle were killed on each side, and each believed it the work of the other in a spirit of revenge. It went from bad to worse; and now our fathers go armed constantly, as if expecting a deadly collision. And, the worst of it is that Taylor professes friendship for each, and they fully believe him."

"Oh, this feud is terrible!" Gladys exclaimed, wringing her hands.

"I have told father what I now tell you, time and again. He will not listen to me."

"And I have said the same to my father."

"And he said?"

"That it was a foolish idea, put into my head by that young scapegrace, Paul Monckton."

She laughed lightly and clung to him even more trustingly than before.

"The question is, what are we going to do about it?"

Paul put the query gravely, but it was unanswered.

"Father demands that I shall give you up, Gladys. That I shall quit thinking about you. Heavens! as if I could do that if I wanted to! And I don't want to."

His tones grew firm and determined.

"What are ranches and lands and cattle when placed in the scale against the woman I love? He threatens to disinherit me!"

"Do you suppose he will do it, Paul? I would give you up rather than see harm come to you, physically or financially."

It was the self-abnegation of true love.

He laughed shortly, and strove to kiss the pained look away from her face.

"Let him disinherit! He started in life without anything and his son can do the same. So I have you, Gladys!"

How many eager, buoyant lovers, strong in their ignorance of the world, have felt the same!

"And you would not tire of me, Paul, if, by accepting me, you were forced to accept poverty?"

She knew what the answer would be, but the question forced itself upon her in a great surging wave of doubt and fear.

"Never!" he cried. "Why, Gladys, I could not live without you! Millions of money could not make me happy."

She nestled her foolish head against his broad breast. She had anticipated the answer; but, hearing it from his lips, gave her new joy and courage.

"And now, Gladys, what are we to do? I asked the question awhile ago, but it slipped by us without discussion."

"I am sure I don't know!" she answered, a sense of undefined fear mingling with her love and trustfulness.

"If you would only be guided by me, Gladys," he said, looking down into her star-like eyes, "the suspense would be soon over."

"You mean an elopement?" she gasped.

"Certainly! What else should I mean? We will never gain our fathers' consent if we wait till we're gray. If we do not take the matter in our own hands, I do not see any hope for us. We are each of legal age, and if we will we can do as we please."

She shrunk from him in a terrified, frightened way.

"Oh, no! Not yet, dear Paul!"

"It's no worse than these meetings and a secret correspondence!" he argued, again drawing her to him.

But she was obdurate.

"Not yet, dear Paul! Not yet! My father loves me so. I believe he will give his consent after a time, when he sees that further resistance is useless. If I can only open his eyes to Taylor's baseness and double-dealing, this terrible enmity may be brought to a close. If our fathers can be made friends, Paul!"

"Which they will never be!" declared Paul, rather gloomily. "Haven't I tried and tried to bring that about?"

"But time may develop something that will open their eyes!" she persisted. "I feel sure of it."

Paul was not at all sure of it; but he folded her again in his arms and told her that with him her will was law.

The heavy shadows shifted, and the traveling moonbeams, spilled through the rifts of cedar boughs, wove strange patterns on the grassy carpet at the base of Pilot Rock. The hours slipped by until midnight. Then the lovers separated, with many vows and pledges.

When the muffled tread of hoofs and the swish of white drapery had ceased to sound beneath the cedar arches, a shaggy head peered around the mass of rock. It was followed by the body of a man.

"Well, dog-gone my cats!" he exclaimed, with a low chuckle. "That war jist the sweetest picnic I've seen fer more'n twenty year!"

CHAPTER II.

GABE TAYLOR.

THE shaggy-headed spy was none other than Gabe Taylor, whom Paul had denominated the serpent that had transformed their Eden.

He was a large and powerful man, with an alert manner and restless gray eyes. His face was not ill-looking; but to the expert physiognomist it revealed a spirit of malicious vindictiveness and a mind filled with shrewd and base cunning.

He advanced to the place where the lovers had been seated and smiled gloatingly.

"I knowed there was somethin' in the wind," removing his hat and rubbing his tousled head.

"John Garland ain't got any eyes, he ain't."

Nach'rel sense ought 'a' told 'im that the young folks would git together. Gladys was as nervous an' twisty as an eel the hull blessed afternoon, and I knowed in reason that a meetin' had been planned fer."

"I didn't say nothin' to Garland. He might think I'd better be 'tendin' to my own biz'ness. But, goodness, ain't this my own biz'ness? You can jist bet it is."

"No, I didn't say nothin' to him! But I jist laid out among the sage-brush after dark, and when Gladys left the house I follered her. An', dog-gone my cats, wasn't it a picnic! If I don't make good use o' that little affair you may call me an idjit!"

He swung his long arms, hugged himself rapturously, and began to pick his way slowly along the edge of the arroya.

After proceeding in this way for about a mile, he came to a saddled horse tied to a scrubby tree. This he mounted, and, striking out across the plains, headed toward the distant foot-hills.

It was almost morning when he reached his cabin. His son Zeke, a young man of nineteen or twenty, was lying on a "shake-down" in the corner of the room, snoring profoundly, his mouth a yawning chasm.

"That boy'll swallow a centipede some night, see if he don't," averred Taylor, seeking a similar bed in the opposite corner.

It was broad day when the young man awoke. His movements aroused Taylor.

"Must 'a' got in late las' night, pap," said the young man, by way of a morning greeting. "I was up pooty late waitin' fer ye."

Zeke was scrawny and freckle-faced, and his voice held somewhere in its depths a hoarse croak. Those acquainted with him said he was "not bright." Yet Zeke was shrewd, on some points, and above all, he was incorruptibly honest. Gabe Taylor had discovered that, to his own humiliation and confusion, on several occasions.

"I suppose you call eight o'clock late!" said his father, in answer to the interrogatory. "You're allus sleepy!"

"Tis rather late, fer me!" Zeke replied. "But I set up tell nine, las' night. Honest, ef I didn't!"

Taylor smiled.

"Had a little biz'ness that kep' me!"

Zeke began preparations for breakfast, and his father sat in the corner, watching him furtively.

"Ever think o' gittin' married, Zeke?" he asked, abruptly.

"Huh?"

Zeke stared at his father, while a hot flush blotted out the freckles. Then he laughed, in a foolish, cunning way.

"Well, now, pap, I might, if I could git any one to have me. That's the p'int! An' then I'm freckled, an' tanned, an' yaller, an' ever'thing but han'some! Guess if I ever git married, pap, I'll have to take a squaw."

Gabe Taylor laughed, a sly, covert laugh, and rubbed his hands together.

"It c'd be arranged, Zeke, if you only had a little grit. An' you wouldn't be boun' to take a squaw, neither."

"I've seen some pow'rful han'some squaws!" Zeke asserted, with a wag of his head.

The young man clattered about the rusty stove, and Gabe Taylor continued to watch him closely.

"What would you say to Gladys?"

"Huh?"

Zeke almost dropped the big coffee-boiler, so great was his astonishment.

"Yes, Gladys—Gladys Garland! Nothin' so curyus about that, is they?"

"She wouldn't have me fer a thousand miles away."

Zeke's mouth and eyes were wide open, and the color in his face came and went painfully.

"Blamed if I don't b'lieve he's already in love with the gal!" musingly.

Then aloud:

"How'd ye know? You hain't ast her!"

"No! she wouldn't have me!" repeated Zeke, picking up the wiping-cloth and flourishing it.

"Well, what if I'd fix all that?"

"You couldn't!"

"Now, see hyer, Zeke, I've got a little plan that'll work amazin'! Of course you'll have to tuck away yer tender feelin's fer a little while. If you'll jist tuck 'em away though, dinged if I don't have you married to Gladys Garland before you're a week older."

Zeke's under jaw dropped still lower, if that were possible.

"Don't quite understand, hey? Well, now, in the first place, Zeke, you must know that women air foolish critters. They'll love a man like a house afire an' they wouldn't no more let him know it than they'd saw their han's off. Now, Gladys Garland's dead in love with you, Zeke. I've been a-noticin' it fer some time!"

"Huh? What's that?"

"I say Gladys is plum head over years in love with you!"

"Don't believe it!" said Zeke, turning again to the stove. "I suppose I'm a fool, pap! A good many folks say so. But I ain't fool enough yet to believe that."

"An' you're in love with Gladys!"

The young man wheeled around as if on a pivot, and a hot flush again hid the freckles.

"Hit plum-center that time!" Taylor chuckled, under his breath.

"You've never tol' Gladys that you're a-likin' her," he continued smoothly, "an' o' course she hain't never tol' you. Tain't natchrel fer women to do that."

"What about Paul Monckton, pap?" asked Zeke, breathing heavily.

"They're played quits. They had a rearin' ole row las' night, an' she give him his walkin' papers. Told him that she didn't keer fer him any more, an' he might's well travel."

"Well, drat it, pap, if that's all so—which I can't hardly believe—how's that a-goin' to help me—s'posin' I am in love with her, as you say? She ain't in love with me, and she wouldn't marry me, if she was!"

"That's the p'int I've been wartin' to git at, Zeke!" persisted Taylor, beamingly. "To carry out my plan you'll have to tuck away yer tender feelin's, as I said. If Gladys ain't plum in love with you, as I think, 'tany rate she likes you, an' that's first cousin to it. She's mad at young Monckton an' now's the time to ketch her, if you really want her."

Zeke clearly did not understand what his father was driving at, for he stared at him, with stupid wonder written in his eyes.

"Of course there'll have to be some underhand work. We'll have to kidnap her!"

"Huh? What's that you say?"

"Why, to make the plan work, we'll have to slip Gladys away into the mountains somewhere. We can have her carried off by some toughs er somethin' o' the kind. Then you can resky her, an' she'll fall right into yer arms, same's a plum drops from the tree when the right time comes."

"If she don't, you can marry her, anyhow. I'll have a preacher er jestice handy. Then you kin make her love you, whether she wants to er not, by jist bein' uncommon good to her. What do you think of it?"

"Huh?"

"I say what do you think o' it?"

Zeke's eyes were rolling wildly and he was evidently having an inward struggle.

"Twon't work! John Garland would shoot me on sight!"

"Don't you be afeard o' that, Zeke!"

Gabe Taylor shook his shaggy head with an air of great wisdom.

"Yer pap's got a little influence there, you must reckon. I could smooth it out and 'xplain the affair till Garland would thank you fer savin' his dotter frum Paul Monckton."

"I won't work, pap!" reiterated Zeke, positively.

"Twill, if you'll do as I say," growled Taylor. "Hang it, you're allus a-croakin' that way."

"Twouldn't be honest, pap!"

"Well, think about it. Stow yer honesty fer about a week. Then you can haul it out ag'in, if you want to. The stake's worth playin' fer, I tell you."

"Couldn't do it, pap! Noways you could fix it! Why I couldn't look 'er in the face, after that."

"Then you'll have to take a squaw, I reckon."

Taylor laughed hoarsely, and sunk back on his pallet.

"Think it over. I ain't had my sleep more'n half out. You see that colt dancin' round out there on the picket-rope. You ast me fer that colt last week. You can have him, Zeke, if you'll snuggle up to Gladys, an' do as I say. Yes, an' a dozen more like 'im, if you want 'um."

Gabe Taylor turned his face to the wall, to finish his nap, leaving Zeke to ponder over this sudden and singular proposition.

CHAPTER III.

HARSH WORDS.

"He's a reg'lar chuckle-head! Blast his honesty! He worrits me talkin' 'bout it all the time. He jist ain't got sense enough."

Gabe Taylor was wrathful—so wrathful that he was on the point of explosion. As a vent to his anger he gave his horse a cut that sent it dancing and snorting on its way.

Zeke had flatly refused to have anything to do with his father's scheme. Neither threats nor coaxing could move him. His mind once made up, Zeke Taylor could be as stubborn as any burro.

"If he'd 'a' fell in with my plan it could have been worked! An' there was money in it, and revenge! John Garland's dotter, the high-steppin' miss jist out o' boardin'-school, married to the crack-brained son o' Gabe Taylor, the vagabone! Confound his honesty, I say!"

"An' then, the money! Jist look at the money I could 'a' milked out o' Garland! He'd 'a' never rested until the two was seprated. Don't I know Garland? He'd 'a' give me ten thousand dollars to take Zeke out o' the country!"

Taylor rubbed his stubby beard savagely and stared with sullen eyes at the speeding ground.

"But, I won't be balked. Revenge is sweet. I ought to know, fer I'm havin' a good taste of it a'ready. An' I'll have more. I'll make Monckton's and Garland's hearts bleed before

I'm through with 'em. They think I'm their friend. Bah!"

A hoarse and vindictive laugh escaped his lips.

It was past noon when he reached the Garland Ranch. As he rode up to the shed-like stable and dismounted, he wreathed his features in an affable smile. The transformation wrought by that smile was astonishing. It rubbed the repulsive scowl from his face and set it with the seal of open-hearted and honest cordiality. But he could not vail the furtive and shifting look of his restless, gray eyes.

John Garland stood in the door of the ranch-house, and shouted a greeting to the new-comer, in true Western fashion.

Garland was tall and gaunt, uniting the air of a border king with the build of a Kentuckian.

As Taylor tossed the bridle-rein over a corral-post, Garland came out to meet him.

"Back again, I see!" he said, smilingly.

"Yes; had a little bizness o' importance that wanted to see you 'bout!" Taylor replied. Then, lowering his voice:

"It's somethin' that concerns you!"

A dark look flitted across Garland's sunburnt face.

"More of Monckton's dirt, I suppose!" he said, bitterly.

Taylor's restless eyes roved about. Catching a glimpse of Gladys in the house, he turned toward the stable.

"It's somethin' rather p'tickler! If you'll come into the stable, Garland, I'll tell you all I know."

Garland followed him into the building, and turned over a box for a seat.

"I hope that you won't think that I'm meddlin' with somethin' that don't concern me," Taylor began, as he took the proffered seat and stretched his legs out in the loose hay. "I thought fer a while that I wouldn't say anything 'bout it. But, when I remembered how good a frien' you've been to me, it didn't seem 'xactly right that I sh'ud keep my mouth shet."

He furtively watched the expression of Garland's face, while apparently examining the quality of the leather that covered his extended feet.

Garland nodded to him to go on, and he continued:

"You know 'twas about dark when I left hyer last night; and, if you'll reckon, it was powerful dark before the moon riz. When I got to t'other end o' the arroya my horse shied at somethin', and spilled me on the ground. I guess 'twas a kyote. 'Tany rate, the critter tuck the back-track lively."

"I couldn't make it home on foot, an' so come back along the aidge o' the arroya, lookin' fer him. When I got out there by Pilot Rock I thought I seen 'im. You know he's got a white patch on his left side! I seen that white a-shinin' down among the cedars, as I thought. The moon was up by that time, but it was dark down by the rock, an' I couldn't make out anything but the white. I crawled up kind o' easy, so't I could ketch 'im—and it wasn't my horse!"

"Well, go on!" urged Garland, shifting uneasily. "What was it?"

"'Twas your dotter, Gladys, and Paul Monckton, a-settin' by the side of her! She had on a white dress, ye see, an' I mistook the shine o' it fer the horse."

A pained look overspread John Garland's face.

"You are certain you were not mistaken?" he asked.

"Certain shore! I couldn't 'a' been mistaken, fer I heerd 'em talkin'!"

"What were they saying?" Garland, demanded, anxiously.

"Well, I couldn't jist make out. But, judgin' by their actions, it was some of this hyer lover nonsense that young folks air allus spoutin' to each other. They have to have it, you know, jist like the measles and the whoopin'-cough. Bein' a friend o' the fam'ly, I couldn't make a spy out o' myself. So I backed away frum there as quiet as I knowed how; and when I found my critter, which I did a little later, I struck fer home."

"I'd determined I wouldn't say nothin' 'bout it, but argy as I would, I couldn't make out that that was the way to treat sech a friend as you've been to me. So, finally, I straddled my hoss and come over."

"I've been fearing something of the kind, ever since I heard that Paul had returned. I told no one that I expected my daughter; and it looks very much as if they had been keeping up a secret correspondence, in spite of my injunction to the contrary."

His face was distorted with passion, notwithstanding the fact that he spoke so evenly. He arose from the overturned box and strode toward the stable door.

"I'm obliged to you, Taylor. It's not pleasant news you've brought me, and they say no one likes the bearer of evil tidings. But I believe I have sense enough to realize that the bitterest medicine is often administered by the hand of a friend."

"'Twas a delicat bit of bizness tellin' him that!" Taylor mused, as Garland took his way

toward the ranch-house. "Come near makin' him mad, fer a fact. But, I had to do it, an' he'll git over his soreness in a day er two. Then he'll thank me in earnest, which I calc'late he didn't do a bit ago. There'll be hot times hereabouts, in a little while, an' I'd better be makin' myself scarce."

He left the stable and swung into the saddle, just as Garland summoned Gladys.

Gladys knew by the ominous frown on her father's face that a storm was brewing, and she rightly guessed that Gabe Taylor was at the bottom of it.

"Taylor's been here with some more of his tales, I suppose!" she said, as her father motioned her to a chair. "I saw him ride up awhile ago. He's always getting you into trouble, father!"

"Taylor's proved himself a friend on more than one occasion, and I hope you'll not speak of him again in that tone."

There was an angry flash in her father's eyes that startled her.

"Now, Gladys, I have something serious to say to you. And remember, I want no equivocations. Why did you meet Paul Monckton at Pilot Rock last night?"

Gladys's face became ashen pale, and she trembled violently.

"Answer my question, Gladys!" Garland demanded sternly.

She buried her face in her hands and gave way to a flood of tears.

"You know I have forbidden you to have any communication whatever with Paul Monckton. I am surprised at such willful disobedience. Why, the low-lived puppy?"

Garland arose and stalked angrily about the room; then, seeing that Gladys continued her weeping without any sign of abating it, he again seated himself and continued, in a voice that was terrible in its low sternness:

"Once for all, Gladys, I say you shall never marry Paul Monckton! I told you that, a year ago, and I am more determined to-day than I was then. Dearly as I love you, Gladys, I would rather see you in your coffin than to know you were wearing the hated Monckton name. There can be no uniting of our families, Gladys!"

"Paul has never harmed you, father!" Gladys pleaded between her sobs.

"It is enough that he is a Monckton. The base ingratitude of his father would sink him to the lowest depths of infamy."

"But, father—"

"I will hear nothing more in defense of Paul Monckton!" Garland thundered, rising. "It is my wish that you shall not speak to nor meet him again; and, to a dutiful daughter, my wish should be law. Cast him out of your mind. He is not worthy of a single thought. A union with him would be a lifelong misery."

"Oh, father, I cannot!"

"If you do not, Gladys!" stamping his feet angrily, "I will place the seas between you!"

CHAPTER IV.

AN ELOPEMENT.

PAUL MONCKTON reined in his horse, shaded his eyes with his right hand and looked out over the swelling prairie.

It was two days after the events just narrated. Some cattle had strayed, and he was out in the rough country bordering the foot-hills, searching for them.

A dust-cloud appeared on the horizon, grew larger and came nearer. At this Paul was gazing. Finally a horse and rider became visible in its midst. On reaching the edge of the broken country, the horseman halted. He seemed to be looking for something or some one, for he rose in the stirrups and swept the country with a searching glance.

"It's a cowboy, that's certain!" said Paul, as he scrutinized the man's appearance. "He hasn't seen me, and it may be that I'm the very individual he's looking for. Perhaps something has happened at home, and father has sent one of the men to hunt me up."

He rode into view of the horseman, and spurred in that direction. The cowboy, as soon as he caught sight of young Monckton, came toward him at a brisk canter.

"It's one of Garland's men!" Paul exclaimed, as the cowboy drew near.

"Didn't know whether I'd be able to find you or not!" said the man, saluting as he came up.

"But, Gladys said I must!"

"Gladys?"

"Yes; she sent a note along o' me, and told me it must be delivered. I had to lie to the ole man a little. Tol' him I war goin' to look up some cattle. Don't know that there's a huff off o' our range; but that's what I tole him!"

As he said this, the cowboy extracted a letter from the breast of his coat and handed it to Paul.

"Reckon, now, I'd git my walkin'-papers, ef the ole man knowed 'bout this. But, hang it all, Gladys has been mighty good to me! Nussed me up once when I had a broken leg! An' I jest c'dn't deny her when she come a-cryin' to me that-away. Says I to myself, 'there's more ranches, ef you git throwed out o' a job hyer;' so I straddled my hoss an' come!"

Paul had torn open the note and was eagerly devouring its contents.

It detailed the fact that Gabe Taylor had acted as a spy upon their movements, and related the substance of the interview that followed Taylor's revelation.

The conclusion was heart-breaking in its pitiful hopelessness:

"And, oh, Paul! You must come to me just once! Father is making arrangements to send me away. I don't know where, but he says that 'the seas shall roll between us.' I will never see you again, dear Paul, after leaving here. I feel it. Something tells me that I am leaving you forever. It isn't hysteria, for I am quite calm. Perhaps it is the calm of despair. But, oh, Paul! my heart is breaking. If you can arrange for one short interview. Just one. Then I shall be more reconciled to my fate. But I feel that I cannot go away without saying 'good-by!' It is wicked in me to ask you to do this; but perhaps the grief that must follow will blot out that sin.

"Your loving and heart-broken,

"GLADYS."

Something that sounded very much like a curse escaped Paul's lips, as he refolded the letter and placed it carefully in his breast. His face was deathly white, and his eyes shone brightly.

"I'm much obliged to you for bringing this, Jim!" he said, to the cowboy, with a great effort at calmness. "If you lose your job because of it, I'll aid you to the extent of my ability."

"Thank ye!" was the reply. "Jim Congdon's had more'n one rough-an'-tumble with life, an' he don't fear no future. I'd 'a' brung it ef I'd 'a' had to leave the ole man's employment to git off the ranch."

"You know what the letter is about?" Paul questioned.

"On'y jest as I guessed it. The ole man's jest b'illin' mad. I heerd him a-cursin' of you, and he's makin' preparations to send Gladys away ag'in."

"He intends to send her to England or France, I think!"

Paul could see that the cowboy thought it an outrage; but the latter said nothing.

"Now you are a friend to Gladys?"

"You bet! I'd wade through fire fer that gal, ef 'twas a needcessity."

"And you can keep a close mouth?"

"Ain't any kin keep a closer!"

"That's what I thought. I always knew, Jim, that you were a true, good fellow! Now, I propose to make a confidant of you. Garland shall not send Gladys away."

The cowboy's surprise at the assertion was not unminged with approval.

"I intend to meet Gladys to-night, in the arroya, a half-mile below Pilot Rock. You know the place. Where the dead cedar has been blown across the trail! I will have my horse with me. Will you secrete Gladys's riding-horse there, just after dark?"

"I'll do it, ef't kills me!" asserted Congdon, with set lips.

"I knew you would. Now, I'll ask you to carry a note to Gladys. Don't fail to place it in her hands, without any one seeing you, before the day is over."

He tore a leaf out of a note-book, and hastily scribbled a few lines, using his sombrero for a writing-desk.

"There!" handing the note to the cowboy. "And don't fail to have the horse in the arroya! Now, I'm off. May God bless you, Congdon, and give you better pay than I'm able to!"

He wheeled his horse and rode away toward the foot-hills.

"The chap's a-gittin' desprit!" muttered Congdon, as he placed the note carefully away in an inner pocket. "He's got some plan mapped out. I could see it in his eyes. Well, I don't take much stock in the Monckton outfit, but I wishes him success for the sake of Gladys. Blast it! John Garland oughter have his head bu'stid fer bein' so p'izen mean!"

Long before the moon came up that night, Paul Monckton was in waiting by the fallen cedar. He had exchanged his blown horse for a fresh one. To his satisfaction he saw that Jim Congdon had complied with his instructions. Gladys's pony, saddled and bridled, was tethered to a cedar, only a short distance away. By its side Paul had lariatied his own animal.

"Congdon delivered the note, or else that horse wouldn't be there!" he mused with a smile of satisfaction. "He wouldn't do that if there wasn't a chance that there would be a rider for it."

He seated himself on the cedar, drew a large envelope from his breast-pocket, opened it and tried to decipher its contents in the gloom.

"Can't make out the names, but they're there!" he muttered, as he replaced the formidable-looking document. "The seal looms up like a meeting-house. I suppose I've looked at that thing a dozen times this afternoon."

There was a feverish joy in his tones.

He began drumming absently on the log, but broke off short as he heard a timid footstep.

Gladys had discarded the white dress, as being too conspicuous, and was arrayed in some

dark material. Hence she was quite near before Paul was aware of her presence.

"Oh, Paul!" she sobbed, yielding to his embrace, as he sprang forward to meet her. "What a wicked, wicked girl I am to disobey my father in this way!"

"You will not be under his control after to-night!" announced the young man, as he led her to the fallen cedar.

She started back in amazement.

"Why, what do you mean, Paul?"

"Perhaps I was a little hasty, Gladys! But, sit down here, and I will tell you what I mean and what my plans are.

"I only intend to urge what I did the other night. Pardon me for saying it, but your father has no right to order you to the ends of the earth, on a question like this. You have some rights in the premises, it must be remembered. He overlooks them entirely."

A week before Gladys would not have permitted any one to speak thus of her father. Even now she shrunk from her lover, in a half-frightened way. But she knew there were some grains of truth in Paul's reasoning; and did not bid him desist.

"Your happiness and mine, Gladys, is at stake. I cannot part from you thus. It will drive me mad!"

He drew her to him in a passionate way.

"No, Gladys! Your father has no right to place such commands upon you. My father intimated to-day that he intended to send me again to the mountains. I didn't reply; but I did a mighty lot of thinking. And when Congdon came to me with your note, I saw there was but one way to pursue.

"I didn't consult you, Gladys, but I rode at once to the county town, and I have our marriage license here in my pocket."

"Oh, Paul! You surely did not!"

"Didn't I, though?" with an attempt at gaiety. "There it is, gorgeous in a red border and a big green seal. And it says that any one empowered to do so by law is hereby authorized to unite Paul Monckton and Gladys Garland in the holy bonds of wedlock."

She clung to him convulsively. Her will-power, borne down by her heart's great weight of love, was giving way.

Paul saw this, and pressed forward, heaping argument upon argument.

"And do you think father will really forgive us, Paul?" she asked, as he paused from sheer lack of strength to go on.

"I am sure of it," was the earnest reply. And Paul Monckton spoke the honest sentiment of his heart. He believed that once the marriage was consummated, both Garland and Monckton would drop their opposition.

"It seems a terrible thing to do," she said, tremblingly. "But, oh! Paul, I can't bear the thought of being sent away again. So far away!"

Fearing her sudden resolve would desert her, he was now leading her to her horse.

"Come!" he urged. "We must be far from here before midnight. I have made up my mind just where to go. Before morning you will be my wife, dearest! My legal, wedded wife! And then nothing can tear you from me!"

He assisted her into the saddle. Then hastily mounted his own steed. A little later they rode out from the sheltering shadows of the cedars, and thundered away across the plains.

CHAPTER V.

AN INTERRUPTED WEDDING.

Now that she had fairly brought herself to consent to an elopement and surreptitious wedding, Gladys was as anxious as was Paul to hurry forward.

"Do you suppose father will pursue us, if he discovers I am gone?" she asked, tremblingly.

"It's quite likely that he will. He would naturally want to stop these proceedings before it's irretrievably too late. And no doubt Colonel Miles Monckton will make a similar attempt should he suspicion what his son is doing. But, my dear, they cannot overtake us, unless they know our destination. That I have not told to any one except you. It's only twenty miles to Cedar City and we can reach it by eleven. Before midnight the deed will be done which will render all pursuit useless."

"Oh, Paul, what if both my father and yours should organize a pursuit! There might be a bloody collision between their forces."

"Not at all likely, Gladys. Your fears are making your imagination painfully vivid."

The moon was now rising; and by its light they could see the Garland Ranch buildings far away behind them.

Gladys expressed her fears that the moonlight would reveal their flight, but Paul reassured her.

"That cluster of buildings seems more like a cloud-bank than anything else. If we didn't know where they are we could not locate them. Small chance that a horse could be seen from there."

Mile after mile they rode forward in this way. Gladys was an expert horsewoman, and bore the fatigue of the long ride admirably.

At last the twinkling lights of Cedar City arose before them out of the sea-like plain.

Occasionally they halted to rest their weary and panting steeds; and on one such occasion, Gladys declared that she heard the thunder of hoofs far behind them.

"Impossible, Gladys!" Paul declared. "No one could know of our intentions. Unless Congdon betrayed us!"

"He would not do that!" said Gladys. "But I declare to you, Paul, I heard the sound of beating hoofs a little while ago. It was faint and far-off, but I couldn't have been mistaken, it seems to me."

"You don't hear anything, now?"

"No! It came on the swell of the breeze. It arose and died away again, as you have frequently heard the rumbling of a train do."

"Only your fancy, probably!" said Paul, spurring on again. "If it was anything it was the noise made by a herd of stampeding cattle. They are often stampeded in the night by wild animals."

This was a consoling view, and Gladys pushed the ugly thought of pursuit from her mind.

On reaching the town they rode direct to the house of a minister: the only one in Cedar City, for that was missionary ground.

The lights were out, but Paul rapped boldly for admittance. It was answered by a grumbling sound. They could hear some one stumbling around in the darkness of an upper room. Then a lamp was lighted, and a female head was thrust out of the window.

"Phat do yees be afther wantin' doon there, annyhow!" growled the head.

"It's the servant!" decided Paul; then aloud:

"We wish to see the minister!"

"He's away wid a dyin' man, praise God!"

"That's bad!" speaking this time in a low voice to Gladys. "I don't see, though, that we can do anything but wait."

"What did she mean by that 'praise God'?" Gladys questioned, her curiosity rising above her fear and annoyance.

"That the man had a minister to be with him, I suppose! Perhaps she will permit us to remain in the house until his return."

The creaking of the sash warned him that the head was on the point of being withdrawn.

"Could you not allow us to remain in the parlor until the minister comes back?" he shouted at the descending window.

The creaking stopped, and the head again appeared.

"Phat's that?"

He repeated his request.

"Well, faix, I dunno! The missus an' me air two lone women, the Lard save us!"

"And I have a lady with me here. So there will be three women to one man; which ought to be a guarantee of safety. I assure you it's very important, or I would not ask it. We have no place else to go; and do not care to sit on our horses in the street."

The head disappeared; and a thumping commenced in the stairway.

"She's coming down! Now look your sweetest, Gladys. You ought to win her over with those witching eyes."

"I'll do my best!" Gladys replied, demurely.

The front door swung open and the head again appeared, this time upheld by the body of a stout Irishwoman.

"You will allow us to come in until the return of the minister, will you not?" questioned Gladys, in the sweetest tones.

The Irishwoman bent forward, held the lamp above her head and peered down into the girlish face.

That look of pleading innocence at once won her heart.

"To be shure, ye can do that same!" she exclaimed, throwing the door wide open. "It's a weddin' yees do be afther, or I miss me r'asonin'! Och, it's a sorry world we do be livin' in; wid weddin's an' dyin's goin' side be side—beggin' your pardin', miss!"

The young people followed her gladly into the minister's cozy parlor.

"Now, av ye'll give me yer bunnit an' fixins', miss; an' yer hat, mither—"

"Monckton!" said Paul, extending his sombrero.

"Why, I'll git yees a bit to ate an' sup!"

They protested that they desired nothing; but in spite of their protests, the Irishwoman proceeded to load the little side-table down.

Paul was anxious and Gladys decidedly nervous over this unexpected delay, and they scarcely heard the kindly words of the servant.

Once a horseman clattered up the street. Gladys commenced to tremble violently, and Paul could not reassure her until the sounds of the horse's hoofs died away in the distance. At every quiver of the tree-boughs she started uneasily.

Fortunately the minister did not long delay his coming. The servant immediately notified him that a young couple were in waiting, and he came directly to the little parlor.

He was an aged and fatherly-looking man, and Gladys's heart went out to him for the sympathy denied her in her own home.

Paul briefly stated the nature of their errand.

"My dears," said the old man, laying his hands kindly on their heads, "I trust that you

have duly considered the important step you are about to take. I will not question why you are here at so unseemly an hour, and untended!"

Gladys was weeping profusely; and the Irish servant gave a few suspicious sniffles and covertly wiped her eyes.

"The young gentleman tells me that you are each of legal age. The marriage license is, I see, made out in due form of law. Doubtless the motives that prompt you to this act are all-sufficient. I readily discerned that this young lady is as pure as an angel; and you, young sir, have an honest look. I have solemnized many such marriages; and have found them to average well in happiness and prosperity. I prefer that all parties should consent—

"There, there, my dear, I will say no more!" as Gladys's weeping increased in vehemence. "I am only paining you.

"Betty, please summon your mistress, that the ceremony may be properly witnessed."

"Do you not hear that tramping of hoofs, Paul?" questioned Gladys, starting up in terror, as the servant disappeared.

"I heard nothing!" Paul replied, reassuringly. "You are overwrought and nervous, Gladys. What you probably heard was the wind sweeping through the hall."

"There it is again!" exclaimed Gladys, shrinking against the wall.

Her lover heard it this time, and the minister could have heard it, too, had he not been poring intently over the marriage service.

"Just some horsemen coming up the street!" said Paul, taking one of Gladys's trembling hands in both of his. "There is no earthly probability that it is any one in pursuit."

His face was pale, but he endeavored to look quite firm and self-possessed.

The servant returned, accompanied by the minister's wife. The venerable missionary readjusted his glasses, and arose to commence the ceremony.

Paul and Gladys got upon their feet and stood before him, pale and subdued.

"My dears," said the minister, beginning his usual preliminary talk, "the marriage relation is a most holy one, ordained by God and—"

There was a wild thundering of hoofs in front of the house and a chorus of jingling spurs.

Gladys started back with an exclamation of affright, and the minister halted, questioning.

The front door was swept open with a rush, and a band of armed and masked men streamed through the hall into the little parlor.

"There they are! Take them!" shouted the leader, pointing to the shrinking couple.

With a wild, heart-broken cry Gladys fell fainting in her lover's arms. Paul, thus burdened, and unable to defend himself, was borne backward by the rush and overpowered. Scant attention was given to the aged minister, and his wife and servant. They were pushed rudely to one side. Paul was quickly bound, and, with Gladys, was borne from the room.

Ten minutes later nothing but the soiled carpet and the tumbled chairs served to remind the minister of the startling events which had just occurred.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MUTUAL FRIEND.

"TEN thousand curses on them all! Monckton is a veritable devil, and I ought to shoot him on sight. And to think that Gladys—"

John Garland fairly choked with rage, as he fumed and stamped about the ranch-house.

"I will commence pursuit at once. If Miles Monckton really is at the bottom of this—and I feel certain he is—I will shoot him down like a wolf!"

Word of the sudden raid and the acts preceding it had been sent him by the minister, who felt that there was some dark mystery connected with the affair that ought to be cleared up.

Since receiving that information Garland had been in a state bordering on frenzy. He had dispatched horsemen to order in the line-riders and the cowboys who were out on the range. He felt perfectly sure that Colonel Monckton was the author of the outrage.

"He is as much opposed to the marriage as I am!" Garland mused. "No doubt he got word of the flight in some way and ordered an immediate pursuit. But, why should his men go masked, and carry Gladys away as well as Paul? It has a black look. Nothing but revenge on me could have prompted it. If he proposes to play that kind of a game, though, I will be ready for him. If I find him with the force of raiders, I will kill him if it costs me my life!"

"The ole man's wilder'n I ever knowed him to be!" said Congdon, as he hurried preparations for the pursuit. "Thar'll be bloody times afore this thing's ended, er I miss my guess."

A man rode hastily up to the big corral and hitched his horse. It was Gabe Taylor. As he turned toward the ranch-house, there was a covert smile on his false lips.

"Rather bad news!" he said to Congdon, as the latter passed him.

"Yes; and, ding my buttons, you know a heap more about it than you're a-lettin' on!"

Congdon muttered, disdaining to answer the greeting.

Garland was still storming about, when Taylor darkened the doorway.

"Come in! come in!" he called out, not forgetting his usual politeness, even in this time of distress. "It's rather a house of mourning I must welcome you to to-day."

"I've heerd the news!" replied Taylor, sympathizingly. "It's purty tough! I didn't r'ally think your dotter'd 'a' done it!"

"It's those infernal Moncktons!" Garland declared, sinking into a chair. "That Paul has completely bewitched her. And now, as a piece of revenge, Miles has had her kidnapped!"

Taylor opened his eyes just the smallest perceptible bit.

"Well, now, that's queer! He says that you done it!"

"What? The scoundrel!"

"That's what he says. I jist come from his ranch. You know, I try to be a frien' to both families, which it's ruther hard to do, sometimes, 'thout makin' one er t'other mad. Was over that way lookin' fer a stray pony which Zeke said had gone in that direction, and the cunnel called me into the house!"

"Why should I do such a thing?" Garland demanded, savagely.

"Well, I don't know's I can say 'xactly. He knows that you hate 'im like p'izen, and that you don't think much better o' Paul."

"No! He's jist like his father—a sneaking and unreliable dog."

"Knowin' of them things, he figgered that you'd stop the weddin' ef you could."

"Well?" as Taylor seemed to hesitate.

"An' he 'lowed that you kerried Paul off to git even with him!"

It was just what Garland had thought about Monckton.

"That's altogether too diaphanous!" said Garland with a sneer. "He is making that pretense to hide his own crooked tracks. He may not have had personal charge of the party, but the work was done by his instructions."

"I hope as how you'll pardon me!" Taylor smiled servilely as he spoke. "But you know that I try to be a frien' to both families. You've been mighty good to me, Mr. Garland, and Monckton's treated me tol'able white. If there's anything I c'u'd do to bring about a reconciliation atween you—"

"Nothing more on that!" interrupted Garland, with a black frown. "I have often been surprised that you hang on to Monckton as you do. I can overlook it, however, when I remember that I once thought him all that a gentleman ought to be. But there will be no reconciliation until one, or both of us, lies in the ground."

"I thought, as a frien' to both families, I might do somethin' to bridge over this unforchinit—"

"That will do, Taylor!" and Garland arose.

Taylor recoiled, fearing that his effusiveness had carried him too far. In truth, the role he had attempted, was an exceedingly difficult one to play.

"No offense! No offense!" he protested, hastily.

"I see you have something there. Is it for me?" Garland asked, paying no heed to Taylor's evident alarm.

Taylor carried a folded paper in his right hand.

"Oh, yes; I forgot. This thing has jist natch'rally turned me topsy-turvy. I don't know half the time what I'm a-doin'. That's a letter, an' it's fer you. I hope you won't hold nothin' ag'in' me fer deliverin' of it. I tried to git out o' it, but I jist couldn't. The cunnel wouldn't let me off no way I could fix it. So I thought—"

"It's from Monckton, eh? Well, no matter what you thought. Let's see it."

He plucked the note from Taylor's hand and glanced hurriedly over its contents.

"The scoundrel!"

He crushed the bit of paper in his hand, and ground his teeth with rage.

"Taylor, I've a notion to pitch you through that door for delivering such a thing!"

"I jist had to!" Taylor pleaded.

"You must have read it, or you wouldn't have known!"

"I heerd him sayin' what I tol' you!" protested Taylor. "I never looked at the letter. May I die, if I did."

"He accuses me of carrying off his boy. The double-faced villain! And asks that I meet him—"

"But let me read it to you."

Garland unfolded the crumpled note.

"While both of us live, Garland, this matter can never be settled. The quarrel is between us and not between our children. Your present dastardly outrage brings matters to a crisis, as far as I am concerned."

"Ther fore, I challenge you to meet me, with such weapons and at such a time as you may select, and we will settle our differences like men."

"That's a nice little game, Taylor, but it won't work. I can see through it quite clearly."

Taylor exhibited great surprise, but whether it was real or assumed was hard to determine.

"Didn't know you were carrying a challenge to deadly combat, eh?" noticing the look.

"If I'd 'a' knowed it I'd 'a' never deellivered it. Lord, sich times as we have tumbled onto!"

He mopped his red face and blew his nose in a distracted way.

"I intend to send a reply by you!" and Garland proceeded to his writing-desk.

"Oh, no! Don't! Please don't!" Taylor urged.

"Yes; but I will! And you'll deliver it, too, or tell me why. You brought the challenge, and you shall carry back my answer!"

Taylor fidgeted and squirmed; and, as the writing proceeded, punctuated it with an occasional trumpet-like blast from his nose.

But, Garland was inexorable; and when the writing was finished, it was placed in Taylor's hands.

"Give that to Monckton! Perhaps it will wake him up a little. At any rate, it will let him know that I see clearly through his little trick."

He held the door open; and Taylor hurried out, not daring to risk an offense by further words.

CHAPTER VII.

MONCKTON'S RAGE.

A SMILE of supreme satisfaction came to Taylor's face, as he turned his horse's head toward the Monckton Ranch.

"Garland's ruther off his pins this mornin'!" he muttered. "Two er three times I come mighty near knockin' the fat in the fire. Had to watch my words like they was dollars. If he'd ever 'a' suspicioned that I was playin' double he'd 'a' tore the roof off o' the shanty. Then I'd 'a' had to plug him. An' I don't want to do that! No, not jist yit. John Garland's got to eat a good deal o' dirt an' humble-pie before he goes over the divide."

"An' Monckton's in the same boat. When I get 'em to tearin' at each other's throats like panther and wild-cat, I'll begin to feel that the day I've long waited fer is at hand."

His face worked with convulsive joy at this picture his fancy painted.

"It takes genius to hide the hate I feel fer them men. When I'm talkin' to 'em so pleasant, I could tear their black hearts out. They've forgot me, but I bain't forgot them, and never will. An' they'll remember me some day in a way that won't be pleasant."

He looked back to mark the distance from the ranch-house.

"They can't tell what I'm doin' that fer!" he commented, as he took Garland's note from his pocket.

He spread it out on the circular top of the saddle-horn, and pressed it down to keep the wind from tearing it. Ther, with many balts and breaks, caused by the motion of the horse, he went over it slowly and carefully.

It was truly a stinging epistle. Garland had dipped a fiery pen into a bottle of gall.

"Jist as I thought, though! He won't fight. With all his mighty airs, I b'leeve John Garland's a coward. I'll have a chance to test that pint some day; and the more cowardly he is the better I'll like it then."

He replaced the letter and rode on, his mind occupied with evil schemes, and the unholy joy that marks a thoroughly base and heartless man.

It was slightly past noon when he reached the Monckton ranch.

Miles Monckton was sitting on a big, raw-boned horse, in front of the ranch-house, impatiently whipping his heavy boots with a quirt of braided leather.

A dozen cowboys were lounging about the corrals and stables, armed, booted and spurred, as if ready for a long, hard and perilous ride.

Miles Monckton was generally addressed as "Colonel," though why, it would have puzzled any one to tell. Perhaps it was in deference to his air and appearance. He was a round-headed, round-bellied and heavy-faced man. One of those men that you are always expecting to see break into a wrinkle of smiles. And when he laughed—and Miles Monckton was given to apoplectic outbursts in that line—his rotund stomach heaved like a ship in a storm, while the whistles and gasps that escaped his lips reminded one strongly of the piping of wind in a vessel's rigging.

But, just now, Monckton was not in a laughing mood. On the contrary, a severe frown tried to find a resting-place on his shining forehead. The frown had a hard time of it, however. The merry lines at the corners of his expansive mouth crept up every few minutes, and gave the frown such a push that it was almost hurled from its slippery foundation.

Taylor noted the warlike preparations with secret pleasure.

"Thought you'd never get here!" saluted Monckton, as he rode to meet the messenger. "That scoundrel talked you to death, no doubt. Now, don't say he didn't, for I know he did. What did he say, eh? Didn't like the pill I sent him! Didn't think he would. And he'll like it less before it's over. I've been practicin' since you went away, Taylor. I can hit a sparrow at ten paces. Put your hat on that post and let me show you."

"No! Well, of course I oughtn't ask it, for it's a good hat. And I'd have spoiled it, Taylor! Now, what did he say? Don't be so long about it, Taylor! I'm burning up with impatience!"

"If you'll give me a chance, cunnel!" replied Taylor, grinning a protest. "You're allus a-wantin' a man to talk and then won't give him a show to put in a word aidgeways."

He produced the letter and handed it to Monckton.

"Ah, the villain! Dares to write to me, does he! I'll have to give him an extra ball for that, when the time comes."

He read the letter over carefully, his features working spasmodically all the while.

At its close his face became absolutely apoplectic in its unnatural redness. He hurled the paper to the ground, gasped for breath and almost tumbled from his saddle.

Taylor sprung to his assistance and lowered him to the earth.

"Where is it?" cried Monckton, starting up.

Then, catching sight of the paper, he dashed at it like a mad-bull and literally stamped it into the earth.

"The scoundrel!" he roared. "To accuse me of carrying away his daughter! Taylor, that's an affront that can only be washed out in blood. Tell him so, will you, if you chance to meet him. He refuses to settle our difficulty in a manly way; and gets around it by a series of lying charges."

"What did he say?" asked Taylor, who wished to appear ignorant of the contents of the communication.

"Why, he said that my offer was entirely too thin, or words to that effect. That, in short, I only made it for the purpose of delaying the pursuit which he was then about to commence. He pretends to think that I want to hold him and his cowboys back until my men can get safely into the mountains with his daughter. Did any one ever hear of anything like it?"

Monckton gave another series of gasps and snorts and seemed actually on the point of exploding.

"I'm shore I never did!" said Taylor solemnly.

"Why, Taylor, it's adding insult to injury!" Monckton spluttered. "To make such an accusation against me, after stealing away my son as he has. It's preposterous! It's—it's outrageous!"

"Mebbe he didn't do it!" suggested Taylor, mildly.

"Why, Taylor, do you want me to shoot you down in your tracks? Of course you don't! Then quit contradicting me. Keep a still tongue in your head, and answer when you're spoken to."

"Didn't you tell me, this morning, that Zeke saw a lot of Garland's cowboys going toward Cedar City, last night? Now, don't deny it, for you did."

"But I didn't say they kerried anybody off er was a-goin' to! Mebbe they was lookin' fer cattle, er mebbe they was goin' over there on a jamboree 'bout lettin' Garland know it!"

"Don't mention that villain's name in my presence, Taylor. And quit disputing me. I know what they went for and so do you. It's all right for you to pretend ignorance, for you claim to be a friend to everybody. They went to capture Paul, and it was done to spite me."

"Hang it, Taylor, I'd rather have the boy married, than to have him carried away and maltreated, perhaps killed. He's a young fool and he's got a temper; and he'll get killed for speaking too plainly. Now, you see if he don't! And it'll serve him just right for disobeying me. If I get him back again, I'll send him to Mexico, hanged if I don't!"

"This is distressin'!" and Taylor, gave a sigh that seemed to come from the bottom of his boots, so long-drawn and sympathetic was it. "Couldn't I do somethin', cunnel, to sort o' bridge over this hyer trouble? It worrits me treemen-jus. Jist to think; the frien'ship o' two sich fam'lies all bu'stid into knittin'-needles, as you might say! Cunnel, it hurts me powerful!"

"Shut up!" snorted Monckton. "Not another word, I tell you; not another word! I won't hear it. This difficulty can only be settled in blood. What, patch up a truce, after getting such a letter as that? Never!"

He seemed about to have another fit of apoplexy, but coughed it back, and placed a silver whistle to his lips. The blast that followed cut the air like a shriek, and sent the cowboys tumbling to their horses.

"No, Taylor, such an insult can never be pardoned! I intend to take the trail of the scoundrels who carried away my son. There will be bloody work, when I overtake them. They have gone toward the mountains, I understand; and we will strike the trail, I think, somewhere in the edge of the foot-hills."

"When I have overhauled them, then I will pay my respects to Garland, whether he wishes it or not. Before that time I shall not trouble him, unless he crosses my path."

The mounted cowboys streamed out of the wide corral-gate, and sat awaiting orders.

"I would like you to go with me, Taylor," said Monckton, as he remounted and placed himself at the head of his men.

"As a frien' o' both fam'lies!"

"Say no more! Say no more! I understand the delicate sentiment of honor which prompts your decision, and appreciate it."

Monckton wheeled his big steed and started at a canter toward the distant foot-hills, followed by his men.

Taylor, at the same time, headed his horse for home, and rode away, smiling craftily, and chuckling out his delight to the summer wind.

CHAPTER VIII.

SEPARATED.

PAUL MONCKTON was stunned and dazed by the sudden appearance of those masked men. A scream from Gladys aroused him and he fought and struggled with a wild and insane fury. But his defense was of short duration. He was rendered half insensible by a heavy blow on the head. Then he was bound and gagged and borne quickly to one of the horses in waiting.

A heavy blanket was tossed over Gladys's head to stifle her cries. It was hardly necessary, for she was frightened almost into unconsciousness.

Her low and piteous moans drew Paul back to the land of life and sensibility, and he renewed his wild struggles.

"Let up on that er I'll pound yer head off!" growled the man who held him, giving him another brutal blow.

A few sharp, quick orders were uttered by the leader and the cavalcade dashed away toward the open plains.

When beyond the town they halted. Paul was tied to a horse and the heavy gag removed. Gladys was also released from the folds of the choking blanket.

Paul was about to speak to her when he was interrupted.

"Ye might's well understan', young man, that we ain't got any time fer chinnin' an' yawpin' on this hyer trip. Ef ye keep yer head shet we'll leave the gag out. Ef ye don't, in she goes ag'in!"

It was useless to resist and Paul saw it. It could accomplish nothing, and might plunge them into yet greater depths of distress. His brain was oppressed and his heart benumbed by the sudden blow that had descended upon him.

As for Gladys she was almost incapable of thought or motion. She had a dim consciousness of passing events, but was mercifully deprived of a full and complete realization of their significance and terror. Since that first startled cry she had lain a limp weight in the arms of her captor, only giving expression occasionally to a faint and weary moan.

The events of the last hour appeared like a dream or some hideous nightmare from which she would soon awaken. The voice of the aged minister, the brutal words, the screams and excited cries, together with Paul's useless struggles, seemed part of a dim and fading phantasmagoria.

The horsemen swept on again through the night, when the changes had been effected. Very little was said. Occasionally a hoarse word of command was given. The clatter of the horses' hoofs kept rude time to the music of the night wind. Occasionally a lonesome wolf howled his distress to the air. Through it all Paul remained silent; and Gladys continued in her dream-like state.

A ride of a few hours brought them to the borders of the foot-hills. Into this rough country they plunged, clambering up trailless defiles and mounting wild and rocky slopes. On, on through the night, with scarcely a break or breathing spell for their laboring horses.

When day dawned they were far into the foot-hills; and the towering peaks looming against the Western sky, showed that they were approaching the mountain range.

Just before sun-up a halt was called, and a hurried breakfast prepared. The tired horses were hopped and turned loose to graze.

"I reckon we might as well take it easy fer a little while!" remarked the one who seemed to be the leader. "Ef ole man Garland ketches us, now, he'll have to hump hisself powerful."

The words brought Gladys back from the borderland of dreams. The helplessness and terror of her situation came to her like a blinding and bewildering flash. The benumbed feeling of heart and brain gave way to intensest agony.

Yet she did not faint nor cry out. She simply drew back with a cowering shudder and covered her face with her hands.

Paul noticed the change in his sweetheart's demeanor. With a glad cry he started up, forgetful of his bonds, only to sink helplessly back against the tree to which he was lariat.

"Oh, Gladys!" he cried, with heart-felt joy. "I am so glad that you are better. I feared you would never come out of that stupor!"

"Shet up!" howled the leader, slapping him brutally in the face. "Ef ther's any chinuin' to be done, *PU* do it."

"You're a dirty coward or you wouldn't strike a helpless man!" retorted Paul, with blazing eyes.

The man showed his teeth in a wicked way and drew a gleaming knife.

Gladys screamed in affright.

"Oh, Paul, do be careful, for my sake! Don't anger these terrible men!"

"The orders is that you ain't to be hurt, young feller!" said the man sulkily. "But, orders er no orders, I don't 'low no man to talk to me thet-away. Keep yer tongue in yer teeth, an' we'll git along han'some. Otherwise I'll carve you, an' take the consequences."

"What are you carrying us off for?" Paul demanded, not heeding the threat.

"To keep you young turkle-doves frum makin' tarnal fools o' yerselves, o' course!" with a hoarse laugh at his supposed wit. "Lord love ye, we knowed ef you got married you'd live to be sorry, an' so we chipped in jist in time."

"I don't believe it!" cried Paul, hotly. "What is it to you whether we married or not?"

Strangely enough, this time Paul's wrath seemed to please the scoundrel.

"Well, you don't hev' to b'lieve it, ye know. Thar mou't be other reasons. Hain't many gals in this country! Leastways not many as han'some as the one over there. Mebbe somebody else is a-banker' fer her? Mebbe it's me! I don't say thet it air; but, *mebbe*!" and the ruffian cast a look at Gladys that fairly chilled her blood.

"If I were only loose," Paul panted, "I'd make you eat those words!"

"R'n'ly now, would ye?" the villain laughed. "Talk's cheap, ye know; but it takes money to buy land! Why, dodrot ye, I c'u'd jest natcher-ly eat ye up, with one hand tied!"

He grinned in an exasperating way, that made Paul writhe with impotent rage.

The announcement that breakfast was ready drew him away from the helpless captives whom he was cruelly badgering.

"I'll talk to ye ag'in, by an' by!" he said, rising. "Jest now I want some chuck. Ridin' in the night air's powerful wearin'!"

He walked off, to their great relief, and seated himself before the big camp-kettle.

Food was brought to the prisoners, but it was not very appetizing, and they had very little cravings of hunger at best. They managed to swallow a few mouthfuls, however, knowing how essential it was to keep up their strength.

Then the glowing brands were kicked asunder and some attempts made to obliterate all traces of their presence there. After this the ponies were brought in, and the wearisome flight was resumed.

Shortly before noon a smoke was sighted on the sloping sides of an adjoining mountain. It was heavy and black, and streamed upward in a wavy column that could be seen for miles.

"Hello!" exclaimed the leader, reining in—an example that was promptly imitated by his followers.

He peered forward through his heavy mask in a questioning way.

None of the abductors had removed their masks. These only covered the eyes and upper part of the face, however, and Paul had so closely watched the smiles and frowns of the leader, as revealed by the changing expression of lips and mouth, that he felt sure he could identify him should they meet again.

Another smoke, heavy and black like the first, now began to ascend, a few rods, apparently, from the other.

"Separate, hey?" said the leader, questioning-ly. "Reckon somebody's a-follerin'! Now, who kin it be?"

Another smoke arose on the mountain-side.

They were evidently signals, and the leader appeared to have no trouble in interpreting them.

"One crowd go to headquarters an' t'other come over there. Well, I'll be blowed!"

For fully five minutes he sat motionless in his saddle, closely scrutinizing the ascending columns of smoke.

When it became evident that no more were to appear, he wheeled about and addressed his lieutenant:

"Orders air to separate. Mebbe the heft o' the crowd's needed over there. There's some 'un a-follerin' us, an' likely the boss is preparin' a trap fer 'im. Ef so, he'll need all o' ye, fer there'll be a lively scrimmage."

"I'll take the gal and dig out fer the home ranch. She's most important, I understand. You take the crowd an' the young feller an' go to the boss."

Gladys uttered a little cry of terror.

"Why, love yer little heart, ye'r as safe as a bird on a nest, wi' me!"

The man tried to give her a ravishing look through the holes of his mask as he said it.

"I'm a women's man, I am, an' as tender as a kitten, an' the boys'll tell you that we've got jest a lovely place up in the hills. You'll like it, I know, fer it's as purty as a pickcher. An' there's a woman there that'll snuggle up to ye like a sister."

He grasped the bridle-rein of a horse, had the girl transferred to the animal's back, and then led the brute by the side of his own along the rocky slope.

At the same instant the other horsemen swarmed about Paul and forced him with them down the declivity.

Gladys was almost spell-bound, with horrible fears, as Paul, struggling frantically and impotently, was borne from her sight.

CHAPTER IX.

STRANGELY RESCUED.

"Now, they jest ain't a bit o' use o' yer a-cryin' yer purty eyes out and a-screechin' aroun' like an owl!" protested the man, as Gladys gave way to a flood of grief and tears. "Cryin' 'll make your nose red, and you're jest natcherly too han'some to spile yer complexion in thet air way. I'm a lover of female beauty, I am, and it worrits me powerful to see you a-carryin' on!"

The fiery glow of his eyes through the mask gave her a chill of horror.

"That thing skeers you, does it?" he asked, noticing the look. "Well, it don't help a man's apearances, that's a fac'. So, by yer leave, I'll take it off. When you see my onest countenance mebber ye won't be so skeery!"

He removed the mask and turned his gaze full upon her.

The countenance thus revealed was coarse and villainous and there was a look on his heavy face that boded ill to the hapless girl.

Her attitude of fright did not please him, for a frown gathered upon his brow and he jerked her horse forward in a brutal, angry way.

"Ain't so handsome as thet air lover o' yours, I allow, but I ain't quite a nigger er a Injun! Come on! We must be a-travelin'. It's a good ways to that little turkle-dove's nest I was a-tellin' you about."

He was chagrined, and nettled, and for some time rode on in silence, then the frown relaxed and he again sought to worm his way into her good graces. He tried to be especially polite; and on several occasions when the route was rough, he got down and led her horse over the perilous places.

"Where are you taking me to?" Gladys asked, her courage slowly returning.

"Why, I thort I tol' you! There's a little nest up hyer in the hills, whar you kin be as free from care as a canary. It's the place whar I expect to hang out for some time to come; and if you'll not stab a feller so with yer purty eyes I'll see that ye're treated jest about white. I've got 'fluence up there. Heaps of it!"

He stopped occasionally to take a drink from a pocket-flask, and Gladys noted with terror that he grew more garrulous and insolent after each drink.

"Don't want any o' the medicine, I allow?" he said, holding the flask up in the sunlight. "Tain't the best truck in the worl' fer women. Likers fer men, but on this occasion, I want yer to drink wi' yer bes' frien', an' so bring us good luck, ye know," and he stooped over and leered at her in a way that made her faint and heart-sick.

A horrible grimace, intended for a smile, swept over his face.

"Ye won't drink, eh? Then I'll jist have to tech the bottle to yer purty lips," and he grasped her about the waist as if to draw her to him, to make her drink.

At that moment there was the sharp, whip-like report of a pistol. With a wild cry, the scoundrel threw up his hands.

Gladys saved herself from falling by clutching at her horse's mane, as the animal gave a snort of terror, wheeled and tore away over the rocks and through the brush.

She heard a series of shouts behind her, but these only added to her fears, as she clung swaying and horrified to the bounding steed.

Then she heard the rapid beat of hoofs, and fearing she was being pursued by the villain from whom she had just escaped, she urged her flying horse into a still swifter gait.

Still that pounding of hoofs came to her ears, and the sound brought with it so deathly a faintness, that she could scarcely cling to the saddle.

It was a wild and reckless race, over a broken and perilous country. How long it would have lasted cannot be known, had it not been brought to a sudden and welcome end.

The pursuing horse stumbled and fell heavily, and Gladys summoned sufficient courage to look back for the purpose of ascertaining the fate of the rider.

The horse was struggling to its feet, and soon came on—but it was riderless. Gladys had been fleeing from her own fears.

When her horse, alarmed by her pistol-shot and the falling man, had dashed off in wild affright, the other horse had simply followed.

The reaction was so great that Gladys fairly reeled from giddiness.

At the same instant, some one shouted, in a rough, but cheery voice:

"Ain't hurt noways, now?"

She looked about. A man in cowboy attire rode out of a fringe of bushes, a little further down the defile. It was honest Jim Congdon.

Gladys greeted him with a series of joyous questions.

"What am I doin' here?" said Congdon, in answer to one of them. "Why, bless yer heart, the hull ranch outfit is jest below. They're a-comin' up the slope now."

Even then Gladys could hear the horses' hoofs.

"We're a reskyou party. The ole man's with the outfit, and we've been follerin' yer trail fer three mortal hours. Struck it in the aidge o' the foot-hills, an' we've been a-bilin' along like the Ole Boy was after us ever sence."

"I happened to be scoutin' 'round in front awhile ago, when all 'twonst I seen you comin' down the hills, lickity-split. From the way you war ridin', I thought shore somebody was after you."

"It was that horsel!" explained Gladys. "I thought he had a rider, but I was mistaken."

Congdon grinned in appreciation of the joke.

"Whar's the young feller?" he asked, after a moment's hesitation.

"Paul?"

"Yes."

"Oh, I don't know!" returned Gladys, imploringly. "They separated us."

"Took him along with the other crowd, eh?" Well, I told the ole man that's the way 'twas as soon as I saw the trails fork."

"Let's ride down and meet father!" urged Gladys, thus recalled to the perilousness of Paul's situation. "Perhaps he will go in chase of the other party!"

Congdon had reason to think otherwise, but he said nothing and led the way down the defile.

The greeting between father and daughter was more pathetic than cordial. Garland could not but remember that Gladys had left home voluntarily and thus in a manner brought upon herself all her subsequent perils and tribulations. And Gladys, knowing that he felt thus, naturally shrunk from opening her heart to him.

"Who do you reckon done that shootin'?" Congdon asked, after Gladys had told her story.

"Why, I think it was the leader of Monckton's forces!" was Garland's prompt and emphatic reply. "After separating and learning what was to be learned from the man who started those smokes, they headed across to intercept Gladys and her escort. Coming upon him, as he was insulting Gladys, they shot him down for the dog that he was."

Garland's dogmatic words and manner showed that he still believed Monckton the author of the abduction.

"Then we'd better be gittin' in fightin' trim!" decided Congdon. "Ef that's so, his men'll be jest 'bilin' down the hills d'reckly after the gal."

"Don't you think that you ought to make some search for Paul?" Gladys asked, appealingly. "I am sure that harm will befall him."

"What! Harm come to him from his own father?"

"But you are not at all certain on that point?" Gladys urged.

"I'm as certain as I want to be. Monckton knows all the ins and outs of this affair. I'm sure of it. Yet he's in the hills, now, with a search party, I'm told, trying to hoodwink me into a belief in his innocence. But I'm not a mole!"

"Well, these hyer ain't Monckton's hosses!" asserted Congdon, pointing to them.

"And the man who was shot didn't belong about the Monckton ranch!" Gladys added, positively. "So, you see, father, the chances are that you're badly mistaken."

"I tell you I can't be!" Garland exclaimed, indignantly. It angered him to be disputed. "Monckton's not a blundering fool, and in a matter of this kind would take extra pains to hide his tracks. Who else would have any interest in the matter?"

Congdon muttered something under his breath that sounded very much like "Taylor," but he said aloud:

"Mebber we'd better go up an' take a look at the man thet's shot. Prob'ly thet'll throw some light onto it."

And he led into the trap, which no doubt Monckton has prepared! No, Congdon! We'll not do anything quite so foolish as that. I've got my daughter, and that's all I came for. Let Monckton look out for his son. He can place his hands on him whenever he wants to. As for me, I propose to take the back track immediately. If Monckton wants to keep up his pretended search, and it amuses him any, why, he's welcome to all the fun he can get out of it."

"But, father," Gladys began, pleadingly.

"That will do, Gladys! Not another word on that subject. Bring up the men, Congdon! We're going home. I don't care about holding the bag for Monckton's sniping-party."

He wheeled about and rode down the defile, and the cowboys obediently closed in behind him.

CHAPTER X.

A MAIDEN DISTRESSED.

GLADYS paced restlessly to and fro in her little room at the ranch-house. It was the day after her singular rescue. Monckton's party had not returned, she had been told, and nothing was known of Paul's whereabouts.

Congdon had secretly kept her posted, and the faithful fellow was now scouting around, gathering up such stray bits of information as he could stumble upon.

John Garland had said no more about sending

Gladys away. Whatever his thoughts or plans were he kept them to himself. Gladys was glad of this temporary respite, yet lived in constant fear of an order that would start her out of the country.

Certainly her situation was peculiarly distressing. Torn rudely from her lover's arms while the marriage vows were almost upon her lips. That lover now the helpless captive of a lawless band. She had no faith in her father's theory that Monckton had instigated the outrage. With Congdon she clung to the belief that Taylor was the individual most concerned. Yet, when she asked herself the question, why he would do this, she could frame no fitting answer.

Thus she found herself, racked with anxiety and anguish, and with no sympathizer save the humble cowboy.

As she paced restlessly to and fro her eyes lighted at the sight of a horseman coming across the plains.

It was Congdon.

"Thought I'd take a look 'round up north!" he explained to Garland, as he rode up to the stable. "Allowed some o' the cattle might 'a' strayed while we was away yisterday. They're all right, though, and the line-riders air gittin' to work ag'in!"

He turned the animal into the corral, put the saddle and bridle carefully away and strolled toward the house.

Because of his faithfulness and general reliability Congdon was rather a privileged character, and came and went pretty much as he pleased. He had been on the Garland Ranch for years, and was always found ready to accept his full share of the rough knocks and hardships of a life on the range.

Gladys was waiting feverishly at the side-door to question him.

"Didn't see er hear nothin'!" he said, looking back to ascertain if Garland was in view. "Rid clean over to the Monckton range. Thar's on'y two men left at the ranch-house an' they don't know anything. Monckton ain't got back yit, and I noticed that his cattle was a-strayin' some. A herd of 'em was feedin' down this way, but I driv' 'em back. He'll have to have a round-up, ef he stays away long."

He conveyed this intelligence without scarcely looking at the door, and then passed on.

Gladys, who had been hoping against hope, returned to her room, weary and heart-sick.

That afternoon she descended to the office, where her father was writing.

Garland looked up with a smile, which quickly changed to a frown, as he noted her distressed appearance.

He seemed old and worn, and Gladys's heart went out to him with a great throb.

He was suffering almost as intensely as his daughter, but his stern determination and unbending pride held him up. In his own way he loved Gladys—loved her fondly—she was his only child—the idol of his affections.

What he considered a sense of duty led him in the path he was now following. He believed that her best interests, in fact her life-long welfare, dictated this course. And when convinced that any particular line of action was right he was as unbending as iron.

It gave him pain; but he felt that personal considerations were wholly out of place in a question of this kind. He could endure the pain. He could crush his heart's emotions back upon themselves. He could sacrifice quiet and self-ease.

It annoyed him to notice—as he could not help noticing—that Gladys was lately cold and constrained in his presence. She had drawn her sympathies from him. She came to him no more with her woes and her afflictions; neither did she pour her joys and gladness into his willing ear.

He believed that Paul Mockton was the secret cause of this. The change had occurred since Paul had won Gladys's affections; and he felt, somehow, that the young man had come between him and his daughter.

His harsh and bitter opposition to Paul he considered justifiable. Gladys had grown to womanhood fully cognizant of the enmity existing between the families. Why had she looked with favor upon the son of her father's bitterest foe? Why had she accepted his attentions? Garland could condone much, but not that!

He had determined to crush out this growing intimacy, and when once he had set his hand to the plow, John Garland was the last man in the world to look backward. Opposition and appeals and tears were alike useless. They only confirmed him in the obstinacy of his purpose. A sublime belief in the justness of his measures upheld him, and he pushed right on—heedless of his own and his daughter's feelings.

"What is it, Gladys?" he asked, trying to speak kindly, notwithstanding the frown, as he saw her halt and hesitate on the threshold.

Those kind words loosened the fountain of love which had long been struggling to break through the icy fetters which bound it.

She rushed forward, knelt at his side, and twined her arms around his neck.

"What is it, my dear?" he asked, again patting the bowed head.

A storm of sobs shook her form.

"Oh, father, I am so unhappy!"

He twisted uneasily in his seat.

"I don't think you ought to be," he said, controlling with an effort the quivering that affected his voice. "You have a good home, and friends in plenty. We are rather isolated here, to be sure, but you have almost every comfort and luxury that money can buy. You are fairly well educated and accomplished. Life is all before you. Really, Gladys, there is nothing to make you unhappy, if you will only take a sensible view of the matter."

"That is true, father, but—"

"There are thousands of girls who would willingly change places with you, Gladys," he went on, not heeding her uncompleted sentence. "There is enough real misery and distress in the world, without our manufacturing any. You are young, and, if I do say it, foolish. You are permitting a sentimental and childish affection to destroy the joy and pleasure that should belong, as a right, to a girl of your years. You will find enough sorrow along your path of life without running to meet it."

"As for the childish fancy in which you are indulging, it is not of a character to last. Monckton realizes it, fool as he is. If your hysterical plans had been consummated the other night you would have lived to bitterly rue it. Believe me, Gladys! I love you as a father should love an only daughter, and what I do I do for your own best good, and not with any intention of being harsh or cruel."

"But Paul, father! Cannot something be done to rescue him from the hands of those terrible men?"

The frown came back to Garland's face with an added shadow.

"I have told you, Gladys, that I think Monckton had the direction of that force. I believe it was organized and sent out under his instructions!"

"But how could he know that we were—"

"On the point of getting married? How could anybody know it? He had the same facilities as others for gaining the information. Somebody found it out."

"But, why should he wish to hold Paul?"

"He is not holding him!" Garland returned, emphatically. "He has sent him away! And he is now remaining out in the hills to blind our eyes to the real character of his movements."

"Monckton thinks as I do on some points. Like me, he realizes that this proposed marriage could only whelm both families in hopeless misery. Not that he cares what we suffer. He is looking out for himself and his precious son. And I propose to look out for the welfare of myself and daughter."

"Doubtless he has sent Paul again to the mountain ranch, and I sincerely hope he can keep him there."

Gladys was weeping quietly and Garland again began to toy with and smooth her luxuriant brown hair.

Her grief pained while it angered him.

"Now, I must return to my writing!" he said. "Be a good girl. You will yet bless the day that separated you from Paul Monckton."

"Never!" she cried, rising and turning toward the door. "You are crushing my life out, father, because of your fierce and unbending pride. Paul Monckton is worthy of any woman's love!"

"Not another word!" he exclaimed angrily.

Then he turned again to his desk, and allowed her to grope her way blindly from the room.

CHAPTER XI.

LAS ANIMAS LUKE.

"DRAT it, pardner, don't crowd on so much steam when we're so blamed near the station! What's the use? I'm one solid, everlastin' ache, from the jints o' my toes to the top o' my years, an' then back ag'in! An' I do believe this blessed pair o' pantaloons is wore plum out!"

There was a peculiarly pathetic appeal in the voice of the little man, as he churned up and down in the deep saddle, his arms flapping like a pair of huge fans.

"If I don't bump a hole through this pesky thing then I'll know it's made o' iron. Time was when I wanted to be a cowboy—same's I used to want to be a circus-rider or a sailor—but I ain't no *havg*!"

He screwed his withered face into an expression of deep disgust.

Las Animas Luke looked back at the grumbler and laughed.

"Why, you're not played out already! We've got ten miles to go yet, if I'm not out in my reckoning. We'll camp at that fringe of trees across yonder."

The speaker was a young man, in rather fanciful cowboy dress set off by a stunning hat with a rattlesnake band. A pair of heavy revolvers were belted to his waist, and he rode with the ease of one long accustomed to the plains.

"That's what you said a little while ago! But, shorely, pardner, you *mus* be mistaken! Them trees *cain't* be more'n a mile. That's what I'm a-kickin' about. What's the use o' wearin' any more vallyble skin off when we

ain't got no funder'n that to go? I ain't a rhinocerhoss, I *ain't*!"

"It will take us till dark to reach there, at our best gait!"

The little man gave a groan of resignation.

"Then I s'pose I'll jest *hev* to stand it, pardner! These perairies air as deceivin' as a 'oman. An hour ago I could 'a' swore that them trees was right out yan. They dance right up to you, and when you think you've got 'em, they dance away ag'in—jes' fer all the worl' like a female critter. Drat sech a country!"

"You'll never make a success in the West, Huckleberry, if you can't endure a little jaunt like this."

"Plague take the West, pardner! You're welcome to all of it, fer *me*! I wouldn't live hyer ef they'd gimme it!"

Las Animas Luke drew his horse in gradually and dropped back alongside of his grumbling companion.

"Thankee! Thankee!" Huckleberry exclaimed, effusively, a grateful smile irradiating his homely face. "I do believe I'm a solid blister. Fly-plasters an' sich cain't begin to ekal it."

He sat more erect as he said it, and endeavored to hold his arms down by his sides. Then it could be seen more plainly what manner of man he was.

From the top of his ancient straw hat, drawn into a peak by sun and rain, to the soles of his heavy, hob-nailed shoes, hovered the indescribable air of a man who has seen better days. It was not suggested by his dilapidated black coat, not by his torn flannel shirt—through the rents of which patches of hairy skin were revealed by the redly setting sun. Neither was it hinted by the lines of his withered and wrinkled face. Perhaps it was his deprecating air; perhaps his grumbling manner. Whatever it was, it seemed a component part of the man, as much so as his drawling dialect, or his small, ferret-like eyes.

Jonas Huckleberry and Las Animas Luke had met that morning for the first time in their lives. It was at the distant railway town. Chance had revealed that their objects and destinations were identical, and they had then and there united their forces and their fortunes; and now, after a ten hours' acquaintance, they felt as if they had known each other from time immemorial.

Luke looked quizzically into his companion's face. It could be seen plainly that he rather enjoyed the jolting race which he had led Huckleberry.

"Rather tough, eh?"

"Tougher'n hoss-hide, pardner," with a puckery smile. "Tough ain't no name fer it. Thought I'd jest *hev* to quit back there. Don't reckon I can walk fer a week after this. My sinners is twisted into ropes an' my spine feels like it's been pounded teetotally out o' plumb. Look at my back, pardner, an' see ef it's as straight as common."

He writhed half-way around in the saddle and presented to Luke a rear view of his rusty coat.

"Only a crick in it, I calculate."

"A crick, pardner! It's a hull river, with a mill-dam throwed in!"

"A hair of the dog is good for the bite, they say!" smilingly. "If you're somewhat rested, we'll jog on again. Those trees are not rising very rapidly and it will soon be sundown."

Huckleberry groaned, clucked loudly and began to dig at the leathery flanks of his steed with his heels.

"An' what did you say was t'other side o' them bushes?" he asked, as he again bounced along in his companion's rear.

"The Monckton Ranch, I understand. Somewhere south of it lies the Garland Ranch. I believe they said south, but it might have been north. I was never in this section before. I have been working on the ranges in Southeastern Colorado. The country looks very much the same, though, and I ain't afraid but that I can find my way around without any trouble."

"What anybody wants to live out hyer in this 'tarnal, everlastin', never-endin' sea o' grass fer, is more'n I can see!" Huckleberry grumbled. "An' sich grass! A downright, healthy cow-critter'd eat a acre of it in a night."

"Don't slander the grass, Huckleberry. It's short, but it's sweet; and it's the only kind of grass that will stand drought and fire. And besides, you're away off as to the amount of it a cow can eat."

Huckleberry subsided, but kept mumbling away to himself as the horses galloped onward. Then he broke out again:

"An' one cow-man is a-fightin' t'other cow-man about his darter er sumthin'?"

"So I understand. They're rivals, I believe."

"Knowed in reason it *couldn't* be 'bout the grass! What's the matter with the darter?"

"She wants to marry!"

"Does, hey? I say, pardner, I ain't so *awful* old an' ugly, am I? What's to hender *me* from chippin' in?"

"Can, if you like!" came back the answer.

"You're quite as handsome as your picture. I'm not a judge of manly beauty, but you can take a peep at yourself in the water-hole when we reach it, if it isn't too muddy or the sun hasn't gone down!"

"Thankee, pardner! Thankee, most kindly! I'll do it."

A light of inexplicable merriment twinkled in the eyes.

"That is, ef I don't git killed on this little expedition o' ours. It's a resky tow-path we're a-follerin'. Ef I sh'ud marry her fu'st an' then git killed! Lork!"

"Why, you'd be dead, of course!"

"Cert'lnly, pardner! An' there'd be a widder an' children a weepin' fer me."

The cowboy laughed loudly, but there did not seem to be much mirth in it.

"Not a jokin' affair, that's a fac'!" Huckleberry observed solemnly, noticing the mirthlessness of the laugh. "That is, 'twouldn't be much o' a joke as fur as I was concerned."

"Can't ye yank them trees along a little livelier? I do believe, pardner, they're travelin' away from us ag'in."

"We'll make it by dark!" Luke assured, cheerily. "The horses are pretty well tired, but if you want to we can drive ahead faster!"

"No, pardner, no! fer the land o' love! I was on'y funnin'. A snail's gallop suits *me*. Dark's soon enough. I ain't askeered o' wild-cats!"

Luke settled down again into his steady, easy, but distance-devouring gallop, and Jonas Huckleberry bobbed and swayed at his heels for another hour.

Then the cedar grove was reached. Under other circumstances it would not have been an especially inviting camping. The gnarled cedars were strung along one of those winding, canyon-like gullies, so common when you near the mountains. The only water it now contained was held in pools or pockets in its otherwise dry bed. The water was little better than liquid mud, for the holes had evidently been visited by herds of thirsty cattle during the day. But it was better than no water, and Luke accepted it as a matter of course.

Not so Huckleberry. When he looked into the filthy water-holes his grumbling recommenced.

"It would improve the stuff to strain it through a hoss-blanket!" he observed.

"Oh, shut up, Huckleberry, and gather some brush!" Luke exclaimed. "I want to get a fire started as soon as I can, for I'm as hungry as a wolf!"

The mental vision of a smoking supper caused Huckleberry to forget his peeled condition and his aches, and sent him on a hurried search after fuel.

While he was doing this Luke watered and lariatied the weary horses, then turned his attention to the fire and the preparations for a meal.

"I'm that hungry I c'd eat roast dog!"

Huckleberry turned his sharp nose into the air, and sniffed the grateful odor of the frying bacon.

"Pardner, I jest am. And tired! An' as fer aches! Ef I had as many dollars as aches I'd be a milyunair."

He looked hungrily at the frying-pan, while he poked vigorously at the fire.

"Done to a turn!" Luke announced, a little later. "Get those other things out of the pack and see if you can cram your mouth so full that you won't be able to do any growling for a little while!"

Huckleberry obeyed literally.

Such a smile of supreme happiness and contentment as came to his homely face as he devoured that first supper on the plains! And when he had finished, he sprawled lazily out on the grass and immediately fell asleep.

Luke spread a blanket over him, then sought out a resting-place for himself; and the nibbling horses and the twinkling stars alone kept watch and ward.

CHAPTER XII.

HUCKLEBERRY CAUGHT NAPPING.

SHORTLY after daybreak Las Animas Luke and Jonas Huckleberry were again in motion. When they had crossed the draw and had the broad vista of prairie once more before them, they saw in the waving distance the cluster of low ranch-buildings toward which they were heading.

"That's the place, I think!"

Luke pointed toward the buildings that seemed to swim and shimmer in the mirage-like atmosphere.

"I'm cert'in I hope so, pardner!"

Huckleberry was stiff and sore and not in the best of humor.

"Yes; I'm sure that's the place. Due north-west from the town, they said, and that's exactly the course we've been traveling. And the distance is about what they stated. It may be that we can get some valuable information there!"

He cantered lightly along, and Huckleberry followed, clinging with both hands to the high pommel.

Two hours passed quickly; then they entered a broad swale, which interposed the opposite ridge between them and the buildings. This swale continued almost to the ranch-house.

When they had reached its end, Luke reined in his horse.

"Now, if you'll go ahead, Huckleberry, I'll stop here until you return. Find out all you can!"

Jonas grumbled, as was his wont, but rode away and disappeared over the divide.

A half-hour slipped away, then an hour, and Luke became alarmed at his continued absence.

Meanwhile, what had befallen Huckleberry?

After crossing the divide he bobbed along at quite a lively rate, turning over in his mind the questions he proposed to ask Colonel Miles Monckton.

To his surprise the ranch seemed deserted. All was quiet about the buildings. The horse-coral was empty. A few steers were wandering about in a lazy way. That was all. Not a sign of human life!

"I'll be blowed!" he exclaimed, rubbing his little eyes and staring. "The chap's either run off or gone out o' the cow bizness, as I'm a weepin' sinner! An' hyer I've been jist a-flay-in' myself alive to git to speak to him! Mortal luck!"

He rode gloomily up to the corral, dismounted with many a puff and groan, and proceeded with slow deliberation to hitch his steed.

"Drat ef I don't take a look around, anyhow!" squinting about with his ferret-like eyes. "They may hev left somethin' that can talk louder'n any man. 'Tain't allus the human voice that speaks the plainest er reaches the furdest. No!"

He slowly circled the ranch-house, peered here and there, in a deliberate, time-killing way, and then turned his steps toward the stables.

He ran the structures over with a careful, lingering glance, and poked his head and shoulders through one of the doors.

Instantly he was seized by a pair of powerful hands, dragged through the doorway, and tossed heavily to the trampled earth.

"Weepin' Jeremier!" he howled, shrinking back in either real or well-assumed terror, as a revolver was thrust into his face. Back of the revolver was a towering form.

"Spyin' around, hey? Thought as how they warn't nobody to home! Now, you'll jist set up an' spit out yer bizness, an' who sent ye, er I'll everlastin'ly cut ye to pieces with a cow-whip!"

Jonas rubbed his eyes and stared.

The speaker was a cowboy, and another stood just behind him.

"Well, I say, pardner, what hev I done? I ain't a kleptomaniac ner a wolf!" Huckleberry drawled, with lugubrious solemnity.

The cowboy looked puzzled.

"Who air you, then?"

"Me? Jes' Huckleberry! Jonas Huckleberry."

"An' in the pay o' John Garlan', I'll be boun'!"

"You're away off, pardner. Sweet sorer! I don't know the critter!"

"Didn't Garlan' send you yer'? Spit out the truth, now, er it'll be the wuss fer you."

"That hoss brung me. 'Twan't Garlan' ner any other bunch o' posies. Jes' that hoss!"

"An' who was the chap you left in the holler back yender?"

Huckleberry started. He had supposed that the presence of Luke was unknown.

"An old side-pardner o' mine! Los Animas Luke they calls him down his way. You wouldn't be knowin' of him ef you seen him."

The cowboy had given an almost imperceptible nod to his comrade, and the latter now threw himself upon Jonas, with a rope.

The little man was evidently taken by surprise, but his wits did not desert him. He hugged his assailant in his long, sinewy arms, and they rolled over and over together in a desperate struggle.

Huckleberry at last got the cowboy by the throat, and closed his fingers with a vise-like grip. In vain did the man twist and squirm. He could not break that tenacious hold. At the same time Huckleberry drew him down with the free arm and squeezed until the fellow's ribs almost cracked. The strength exhibited by the little man was truly wonderful.

Seeing that it was likely to go hard with his comrade, the other cowboy now sprung forward and dealt Huckleberry a stunning blow on the head, completely blinding him for the moment and causing him to relax his grasp.

This the cowboy followed up with another blow that brought the blood; and then threw himself into the contest.

The result was that Huckleberry was quickly overpowered, bound and dumped unceremoniously on an adjacent heap of hay.

"Jes' like I was a bundle o' ole bones!" he panted, immediately regaining his equanimity. "Sufferin' saints!"

"I saw you war lyn', right away!" said the cowboy, hotly. "Now you'll talk straight er I'll cut the hide from your body, inch by inch."

He produced a wicked-looking whip, as he spoke, and swished it vigorously through the air.

"Which wouldn't be a hard job, pardner, considerin'! There ain't more'n about two square feet o' hide left onto my wuthless body. You'll find the rest o' it stickin' to the saddle

out yan. Not that I'm a-keerin'! But, whuppin's hard work, an' a little 'vestigation might save you some extra licks. No use coverin' the same territory twic't, you know."

Huckleberry's audacity seemed boundless.

"I don't want to hurt ye, stranger!" the cowboy continued, twirling the whip. He was puzzled by Huckleberry's words and manner. "Ner I won't ef you answer straight. I know John Garlan' sent you, and you've got to tell why he done it!"

"There you go ag'in! Why, pardner, I don't know the critter. I couldn't say whether he's red-headed, er as han'some as a new-fangled photygtaph."

There was a pitiful-pleading look in the little eyes.

"You've got me harnesssed and boun' to hev some fun out o' me, whether er no, an' I s'pose I'll jes' hev to harden my heart to it. But, pardner, the squir'l ain't up this tree. Sweet primroses! No!"

He broke off short, and turned to the cowboy he had gripped so tightly.

"Tell him it ain't, pardner! Tell him it ain't! An' I'll be everlastin' obleeged to you."

"I see I'll have to give it to you!" said the first cowboy, pulling the lash briskly through his hand and raising it aloft. "Then we'll tend to that chum o' yours down in the valley. John Garlan' won't send any more o' his ornery spies down hyer while I'm bossin' the ranch."

"He's a-comin'!" cried the other cowboy, ducking his head through the door.

"T'other chap?"

The lash dropped to the ground in snaky folds.

"Well, we'll jist rake him in!"

"Twins in misery!" growled Huckleberry.

"Bad luck jes' natcherly comes in chunks, like poor sugar! Say, pardner, gimme the lickin' an' let him off, cain't you?"

The cowboys paid no heed to the doleful appeal.

Las Animas Luke was advancing at a brisk canter. His eyes fell on the horse tied to the corral and on the open stable door. Believing that Huckleberry was within the stable, he rode toward it.

As he faced them, the eyes of the cowboys rounded out in questioning surprise.

"Tain't—can't be! An' yit it must! That jist jerks me off my pins—it do!"

Huckleberry noticed the wondering gaze and the exclamatory sentences.

"Anything broke, pardners?" he drawled with languid interest.

"Yes, it's him! Er else it's he's brother! Must be! He's rigged out different, an' that's a stranger boss. An' he's got a mustache, which he didn't have—an' his complexion don't seem exactly right. Thunderin' queer!"

The rider came on, all unconscious of the torrent of conflicting comment he was provoking. He seemed to fear that all was not right, for he drew a revolver and cocked it, as he neared the building, and cast many curious and anxious glances around.

"Found a pachyderm, pardners? Would like a peek, ef it's a free show!"

Huckleberry had wriggled into a sitting posture and was regarding them with crafty, questioning eyes.

In answer to his appeals, one of the cowboys swung the door open to its full extent, bringing the horseman plainly within the orbit of his vision.

A snort of disgust came from the little man.

"Las Animas Luke, by mighty! Lork! I thought you'd found somethin'."

At the same instant the horseman caught sight of the bound form sitting upon the straw. Quick as thought he drew in his horse and covered the nearest cowboy with his revolver.

"Will you explain this outrage?" he demanded.

"Why, you see, boss," the cowboy began, cowering visibly. "he come er-snoopin' aroun' an' we allowed that—"

"Untie him, or I'll put a hole through you!"

"Cert'ly! cert'ly!" rushing to the astounded Huckleberry and commencing to fumble with the knots. "We jist thought—"

"That you had him at a disadvantage and therefore you'd proceed to rob and murder him! A nice country you have up this way, truly, where a man can't go to a gentleman's house without bein' jumped onto by a set of curs!"

The cowboy gave him a reproachful glance, but continued to twist at the knots.

As for the remaining cowboy he simply stared at the horseman in wild and open-mouthed astonishment.

"Come! come!" Luke cried impatiently. "Cut the ropes, if you can't untie them. We'll get out of here. I wanted to see Mr. Monckton, but the desire has about vanished. Judging by his cowboys his friendship wouldn't be alluring. Like master like man!"

"Yes, ampetate 'em!" suggested Huckleberry, nodding to the ropes. "You'll find a knife in my belt."

For answer, the cowboy whipped out his own knife and severed the bonds, and Huckleberry bounded nimbly through the doorway.

"Straddle your horse!" commanded Luke, as

the little man passed him at a dead run. "I'll hold these fellows back or shoot them."

The cowboys seemed to have no desire to follow Huckleberry, or make any attack on the reckless rider, but stood just within the stable staring from one to the other in a perplexed way.

"Now slide, and I'll follow!"

Huckleberry bumped away from the dangerous locality; and Las Animas Luke, still holding the cocked revolver, slowly backed his horse until the ranch-house interposed between himself and the cowboys.

Then the latter drew long breaths of relief, and one exclaimed:

"Fer downright show-actin' that jist knocks the persimmons! P'intedly I'll have to write to the ole man!"

CHAPTER XIII.

A QUESTION OF IDENTITY.

WHEN they had regained the swale, Huckleberry broke into an irresistible and cackling laugh that shook and swayed his light form in an alarming manner and pumped the tears in torrents from his little eyes.

"I wouldn't 'a' missed that circus, pardner, not fer planets!"

The laugh was contagious and Luke joined in it in spite of himself.

"It wouldn't have been quite so funny if I hadn't happened along just as I did. They evidently had it laid up for you!"

"I never seen anybody cave so suddint! I say, pardner, how *did* you do it? I'll buy the reseat, ef it costs me my forchun!"

"Nothing so very strange about it that I can see!" Luke returned. "I have generally noticed that those who are most cruel by nature are the biggest cowards. They saw they would have to fight or back down. I had the drop on one and he would certainly have gone under. They saw it, and wisely dropped out of the game. But what did they harness you up for?"

Huckleberry seemed inclined to push the other line of inquiry.

"Steady, pardner! Steady! Hain't got that reseat yit. Must hev been yer eyes! They do look uncommon bright. Couldn't make mine look that way more'n you could make stars o' thistle-blossoms. Ef 'twas your eyes you could git big pay as a tiger-tamer!"

Luke returned his quizzical glance with a smile.

"The eyes looked out of the revolver tube, Jonas! But that isn't telling me whht they snaked you in for!"

"Said that I was a spy o' Garlan's. Sufferin' Samson! And I don't even know the critter!"

"And you didn't learn anything?"

"Not a solitary! On'y that the ranch seems to be bu'stid an' everything a-runnin' out eend-ways."

"Strange!"

Luke seemed pondering the situation.

"We'll have to strike out somewhere and see if we can make any discoveries. There ought to be some tangled ends of the trail we're looking for in this vicinity. We've got to find a starting point."

"Le's try Garlan's!"

"I've thought of that. Did I say it was north or south, Jonas?"

"Well, now, hang me, if I can reckon! Kinder seems to me you said both ways."

"Perhaps I did. I'm a little uncertain. But I think it was south. I saw some buildings off in that direction, when we were on the ridge awhile ago. They only looked like dark specks, but I know they are buildings."

"Might be cow-critters!"

"No; they are buildings. Cattle couldn't be seen that far, even in this air."

"K'rect! You're the off'ser o' the day. So, ef you say foller, foller it is. Though I *do* hope, pardner, you won't pull the ingine quite so wide open t'is trip as you did yistiday. I put a high vally on the mite o' skin that's left on my anatomy; there's sich a little of it."

Luke only laughed as he turned his horse's head toward the far-away buildings. But he bore in mind the doleful look that accompanied the request and moderated his speed to his companion's capabilities. If he had any definite plans he did not reveal them to Huckleberry; and the latter asked no questions.

An easy jog of three hours brought them quite near to the buildings. Luke noticed several men scattered about on the range, but paid no heed to them and rode straight toward the house.

Suddenly a horseman darted out from among a bunch of cattle and galloped furiously toward the ranch-house.

"Another suspicious critter!" growled Huckleberry. "Blast it, pardner, it seems in the air. We'll begin to 'spicion each other, d'reckly."

The horseman circled a knoll and disappeared, to Luke's evident relief.

"I was afraid we were going to have more trouble!" he said, looking anxiously about, to see if there were any other galloping horsemen.

"As you say, Jonas, the air seems impregnated with suspicion."

"Perhaps we'll find Garland away, also!"

He kept up a wary watch and from time to time looked anxiously toward the house.

"Drat it, pardner, he's circled us!" Huckleberry howled. "Git out yer shooter. He's a-comin' eend on and hair a-flyin'!"

The horseman had re-appeared from a gully, only a few rods away, and now came toward them at that same thundering gallop.

It was John Garland, and he was evidently in a savage passion.

Luke's face paled slightly and he gave a start as he saw him appear; yet he rode right on.

"Another cowboy game of bluff, probably!" he muttered to Huckleberry. "Keep a stiff back-bone and we'll see what he has to say directly. This is a free country, and I suppose a man has a right to travel around in it, if he keeps his hands off of other people's property."

The horseman was now quite near, and it could be seen that his face was white with suppressed rage.

"Bristles fer all the worl' like a bulldog. Pardner, I wouldn't nuss a temper like that fer wages."

Huckleberry had regained his equanimity and his philosophy at the same time.

"Not another step, Paul Monckton!" called out Garland, drawing a gleaming revolver. "You have come quite fur enough!"

Luke started back with an alarmed air and a gasp of surprise; and Huckleberry threw up his hands in wild astonishment.

"I—I don't know that I quite understand!" Luke stammered. He saw that the man was in a murderous mood.

"Oh, you understand quite well enough!" Garland sneered. "Probably you think you can deceive me, but you can't. Now, what are you doing down here?"

"We came to see John Garland, the owner of the ranch. That is, if this is the Garland Ranch, as we suppose."

It was Garland's turn to be surprised. But he quickly recovered, and the whiteness of his face took on a ghastlier hue, while his eyes seemed to emit fire.

"I am John Garland, and you know it full well, and you ought to know that it is as much as your life is worth to venture down here. Doubtless you hoped I would be away, and you would get to see Gladys."

"Mystikal mankind! What's he a-drivin' at?"

Huckleberry's eyes seemed starting from their sockets.

"There is a mistake somewhere, Mr. Garland!" Luke ventured, with a puzzled air. "My name is Luke Lockburn. Generally I am called Las Animas Luke. I am at a loss to know in what I resemble this Paul Monckton. I believe that's what you called me."

"And do you deny that you are Paul Monckton?"

Garland almost screamed the question, so great was his fury.

Luke turned away in disgust.

"Up another stump!" growled Huckleberry. "Drat a country where you can't ast a man a decent question without havin' him plum astraddle o' yer neck!"

"It's no use to talk to you, Mr. Garland; I can see that plainly. I came down here with the best of intentions, hoping to glean some information that might be of service to us. Before I can open my mouth you pull a revolver on me and order me off the range. And all because I chance to look like some one I have never even seen."

"So you propose to add insult to the injuries you have already done me! It won't do, Paul Monckton, for you are Paul Monckton, and I know it, in spite of your attempts at disguise. I recognized you as soon as I saw you. You couldn't disguise yourself so that I wouldn't know you."

"Your father is off in the hills, now, playing a part, and you are attempting to play another. You can tell him, though, that the week he has spent there has been wasted. That is, if you dare to let him know that you have returned, which I very much doubt."

"No, Paul Monckton! You may think you are very clever, but your little game won't work. You have already ruined my once happy home and broken my daughter's heart. If you attempt to see her again I will kill you!"

"Now go! And if you place any value whatever upon your life don't revisit this vicinity! Go! Go! Go!"

"Land o' Joshua! I sh'd say we would!" Huckleberry snorted, wheeling his horse. "The gentleman or't to hire a hall!"

Luke also jerked his steed around.

"Very well, Mr. Garland; have your own way! We'll not trouble you further. Perhaps there are men in this country who will answer a few civil questions!"

"Don't believe it!" exclaimed Huckleberry. "They ain't built that-a-way!"

"Go!" shouted Garland, "before I am tempted to fire on you."

"Great he'vings! Ain't we a-goin'? I ain't under contrac' to churn no more hide off fer any man!"

Huckleberry was bobbing up and down in the

deep saddle, even as he said it; Luke fell quietly in behind him; and together they rode away, leaving Garland master of the field.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE COWBOY'S MESSAGE.

WHEN Colonel Miles Monckton, panting and puffing with rage, rode away at the head of his men toward the foot-hills, he fully believed that John Garland's cowboys had been the rude intruders into the minister's little parlor, at Cedar City.

The minister had sent him word of the outrage, as he had Garland, for the names on the marriage license had revealed the identity of the lovers.

When word was brought to Monckton that Garland had also put his force in motion, it naturally augmented his rage; and his exclamatory pantings increased in force and frequency until they resembled not a little the exhaust of a steamer.

"The scoundrel!" he spluttered, mopping his steaming forehead with a flaming red handkerchief. "I can see through his little game. He didn't think I would trouble myself to look up the trail, probably; and now that I have, he proposes to push on ahead with his men and trample it so that a bloodhound couldn't follow it."

Garland was in advance of them; and to Monckton's heated brain, at least, the theory seemed quite plausible.

"If he places himself in my path, I'll down him like a wolf!"

"Thar'll be hot times afore this trip ends, er I'm a gopher," whispered one cowboy to another, as he watched the swelling rage of his employer. "That is, ef the ole man don't bust a blood-vessel, which I'm rather expectin' him to every minit. He's a-gittin' redder an' redder, jes' fer all the worl' like a fightin' turkey-cock."

The figure was so apt that the other cowboy could not resist an explosive burst of laughter.

"Silence, you—you—" roared Monckton, choking and fuming. He thought the cowboys were laughing at his exhibition of anger. "It won't be any laughing matter when we come into collision with Garland's force. And we will, if he remains in the hills. I've made up my mind to that. He sneaked out of accepting my challenge. He can't very well sneak out of a fight of this kind, if I force it. And I'll force it. That is, if my men don't prove to be a lot of lily-livered curs when the time comes."

He glared around angrily, to see if any were beginning to show signs of cowardice.

"We'll back you, ole man, don't you never weep!" exclaimed the cowboy who had drawn forth this outburst. "We think, like you, that Garland hasn't showed the clean, white article; and ef he's reely a-holdin' Paul we'll git him away from thar, ef we have to do it with Winchester."

Thus mollified, Monckton rode on, mopping his brow, and occasionally loading the air with grumbling exclamations and bitter epithets.

They did not strike the trail of the abductors until after the latter had separated. It was the trail of the larger party that had gone toward the mountain, with its ascending columns of smoke.

This trail they had not followed long until it wheeled suddenly to the left, then broke up and became lost in the flinty soil.

"Looks like they'd charged somethin' and then scattered, every one fer himself," said one, examining the broken trail critically.

"Minds me more like the Mizzury River!" suggested another. "Sometimes that plaguy crick 'll see a bug er sumthin' out on the prairie, a mile away. It makes up its mind that it's bound to have it, an' away it goes, jest a-cuttin' an' a slashin'."

A smile twinkled about Monckton's eyes at the aptness of the illustration. It was hard work for him to remain angry more than an hour or two at a time. He had kept his passion at fever-heat for a half-day, and it was telling on him.

"Can you make anything out of it?" he asked of a cowboy who had dismounted, and was now running about like a baffled setter.

"Not a thing!" was the reply. "The s'ile's too pesky hard."

"It's only a trick, I think!" said Monckton. "Doubtless they know we are following and are trying to throw us out or mislead us. Scatter, everybody! and keep your eyes open!"

The cowboys deployed, at the command, and advanced slowly; closely watching every rock and bush.

"Be on the lookout for an ambush!" Monckton cautioned. "It would be just like Garland's men to lead us into a trap."

No ambush was revealed, however; and, despite the most vigilant search, nothing was discovered.

An hour passed away, then one of the cowboys gave a great yell. He had ventured further than his companions and now came riding back, shouting and gesticulating.

He announced that he had found the trail; and the entire party rode forward to inspect it. It reappeared here as suddenly as it had been

lost. Not a horse was missing; for one of the cowboys took the trouble to ride back and count the footprints.

It seemed certainly a trick, designed especially to baffle them.

The rediscovered trail led again toward the mountain; and Monckton pushed his men forward as rapidly as the nature of the ground would permit.

When they had reached the mountain and ascended to the place from whence the columns of smoke had that morning arisen, the afternoon was well advanced.

They discovered the little heaps of ashes and the bits of charred wood. A conference seemed to have been held there, for the ground was trampled as if by a group of restive and impatient horses.

At this point, also, the trail again ended. The horsemen, as shown by the hoof-prints, had left the place singly or in little knots, going toward all points of the compass.

"It's another effort to throw us off!" Monckton cried, fumingly.

A second search was commenced; but the hours crawled by and darkness fell without any discovery having been made.

It was renewed in the morning; and all through the day the sides of the mountain were scoured by expert and eager trailers. Without avail. If the horsemen had come together again, it had been far beyond the searching circles made by the cowboys.

Day followed day. The circles were widened. Long trips were made through the foot-hills. The ground was intersected in every direction.

The trail of a single horse was crossed occasionally. Sometimes the trails of two or three. But it soon became difficult to distinguish between these and the tracks made by their own horses.

Monckton was wild with impotent wrath. He had lived in constant expectation of an encounter with Garland's men. If they were in the hills, however, they kept aloof. More than once he pictured Garland at home, chuckling over the baffled rage of his enemy. At such times Monckton could scarcely resist the impulse to call in the cowboys and advance upon Garland's Ranch with murderous intent.

The chafing and fretting told upon him. His puffy, red face became flabby and almost colorless. His explosions of anger were as violent as ever; but it could be noticed that his hands twitched and trembled at such times in a way that was quite unusual to them. In short, Monckton was rapidly breaking down under the tremendous strain.

At last one of the men stumbled upon the body of the scoundrel who had been so mysteriously shot while in a drunken and insulting mood.

The discovery produced a great deal of wondering comment; and Monckton's men subjected the ground about the place to a most rigid search.

The footprints of the horse ridden by Gladys in her flight were noted, and also those of the horse that followed. So much time had elapsed, however, that little else could be detected.

These footprints were traced to the point where Gladys met her father and his cowboys; and the joint trail was then pursued until it emerged upon the Eastern plains.

While cogitating over the find and endeavoring to extract some bits of information from it, a horseman was seen to emerge from a hollow some distance away.

He came toward them, waving his hat; and it was soon discovered that he was one of the men Monckton had left in charge of the ranch.

The cavalcade was filled with curiosity at his appearance and rode out to meet him.

"Found you easier'n I 'lowed I would!" he said, with a pleased grin, as he returned their boisterous greetings. "Thought I'd have a big hunt fer it. We calc'lated we'd send you a letter, but couldn't find no one to kerry it, an' so I up an' come myself!"

Monckton was puzzled and showed it clearly in his face.

"Why, you see, boss, Paul come baek yister-day an' we figgered that you'd ort to know it; seein' that you wus wastin' vallyble time up hyer a-lookin' fer him."

Monckton could not repress a cry of astonishment; and the cowboys almost bore down the message-bearer with a storm of questions.

"Easy, boys! Easy!" he protested, "an' I'll tell all I know."

He then related how Huckleberry had come spying around, how they had surprised him and of the way in which he had been released—detailing even the minutest particulars.

"And you say Paul was disguised?"

"He cert'ly was, boss! He had a new hoss, new clo'es, a consid'able fringe o' hair on his upper lip an' he'd done somethin' to his complexion. Blamed ef I know what. But it was Paul! I'd take my 'davy on it; and he went away with that cur'us-lookin' feller straight toward Garland's. I clim' up onto one o' the buildin's an' watched 'em."

Monckton was mystified.

"Why he should do that is more than I can conjecture. He knows he would be welcome at home. There is no necessity for his coming

there in disguise. You certainly must have been mistaken."

"Nary mistake, boss! I couldn't see through it, no more'n you kin. But it was *him*. An' he went toward Garlan's!"

This last, in the eyes of the cowboy, placed the cap-sheaf of conviction upon his evidence. Hope and doubt struggled for the mastery in Monckton's mind.

"If it was Paul he will return!" he said at last, with an air of conviction. "At least I can see no reason why he should not. We will go home and await developments. We are not making any headway here. If Paul, or whoever he is, remains on the plains, some of you ought to be able to find him and speak with him."

A feverish light came into his eyes as he turned his horse toward the open country.

The cowboys were worn with the long and exhausting search and were eager for a respite. So they fell in behind him gladly and unquestioningly.

But when they reached home that night, the stranger, whom the cowboy had said was Paul, had not returned.

CHAPTER XV.

JONAS IS BEWILDERED.

AFTER their repulse by John Garland, Las Animas Luke and Jonas Huckleberry rode away in the direction of the foot-hills. It seemed useless to remain longer in the vicinity.

Luke was strangely silent during that ride. Perhaps he was slowly evolving some plan by which he might get at the coveted information. He paid little heed to the running fire of comment kept up by Huckleberry, only answering when directly questioned, and then in monosyllables.

But as evening drew near he came out of the reverie into which he seemed to have fallen, and laughed and joked in his old-time way.

When Jonas awoke in the morning Luke had disappeared. The blanket in which he had slept lay in a tumbled heap, and their camping outfit was undisturbed. But Luke and his horse had vanished.

The little man stared about in amazed bewilderment.

"Mystikal c'nundrums!" he exclaimed, rubbing his ferret-like eyes. "That jes' tucks Samson's riddles clean under the willer-tree! Now, where's that boy gone?"

He got up and shook the blanket, as if he expected horse and rider to tumble from beneath its folds.

"Lays me out flat! It does so! Hoss-thieves couldn't 'a' made a mistake like that, and snaked out the boy thinkin' 'twere my animal. No! Even a hoss-thief 'u'd have more sense! An' 'twasn't Injuns, er they 'a' gobbled the blanket!"

Huckleberry gave a snort of disgust and looked over the encircling plains.

Far away toward the East could be seen a moving speck, which, as he gazed, resolved itself into a horse and rider.

"Hanged ef he ain't gone back to Garlan's. The mysteriousness o' this thing worrits me. It makes my cranium jes' buzz 'round like a bumble-bee in a patch o' buckwheat."

"Now, what's he gone back *there* fer? Unless—unless—"

Huckleberry stopped and scratched his head in a dazed way.

"Looks that-a-way; blamed if it don't! But shorely—shorely—Hold hard, Jonas! Hold hard! Don't go to s'picionin' yer pardner too soon. Now, don't ye; er you'll lose my respect. You will so!"

The horseman was advancing at a brisk canter, and when he was near enough Jonas could see that he was bending forward as if closely watching the ground.

"He's a-lookin' fer somethin'!" Jonas whispered. "Lost his gold watch yisterday, mebber. That is, if he kerried one. I wouldn't hev gone back there for forty watches, I wouldn't; with that wild man a-rompin' aroun'! No; not if they was jeweled with stars an' made out o' diamonds!"

"Hello! 'Tain't him! Er if 'tis, he's got another boss. That ain't his critter. Oracles o' Greece! No! That's a claybank, an' his'n was red!"

Jonas gave his eyes an extra dig and stared again.

The horseman looked up and saw the little man standing on the high banks of the creek. Then he ceased his inspection of the ground and came briskly forward.

It was not Las Animas Luke.

"Misery an' disappointments an' woe! 'Tain't him no more'n it's his boss. Ner 'tain't that other chap that swings a peppery temper along o' his revolver. Who *kin* it be?"

In truth, it was Jim Congdon, a man wholly unknown to Huckleberry.

Congdon peered about curiously as he rode up and noticed that Huckleberry was alone.

"Hello!" he said. "Whar's yer pardner?"

"Answer it, stranger, fer I can't!" Huckleberry replied, dolefully. "Here yisterday an' gone to-day, like the candy-butchers of a side-show."

Congdon stared.

"And you don't know whar he is?"

"Nary, pardner! nary! If they was witches in this country, I'd say it was them. But as you hain't any ole castles an' s'ch I s'pose you can't afford 'em. It takes age to produce witches."

Huckleberry was evidently a puzzle to the cowboy.

"Well, my name's Congdon—"

"Thankee, Mr. Congdon! Thankee! I'm glad to know you. I am so!"

"An' I work fer John Garland!" Congdon continued, scarcely knowing what to make of the bowing individual before him. "You was out thar yistiday with this young feller?"

"An' come plaguey near gittin' shot!" Huckleberry asserted, straightening up.

Congdon laughed.

"Well, the ole man was ruther warm. I seen him when he tackled you."

"But it's his darter what brought me. I got to thinkin' 'bout the thing las' night, an' this mornin' I cut out afore daylight. That gal's plum pinin' herself away. She thinks that Paul Monckton's in terrible trouble o' some kind."

"I struck yer trail as soon's it got light, an' follered ye up, deetermined to know ef the feller that Garland had words with was reely Paul Monckton. It would be a blessin' to the gal to know the truth."

"Now, string yer rope straight, pardner; is the chap Paul er not?"

He looked Huckleberry fairly in the eyes, as he put the question.

"Wisdom o' Solomon! You'll hev to tackle a wiser head'n mine, pardner, ef you git an answer to that. I don't know. I've been figgerin' all the time that he wasn't."

"But when do you reckon he'll return?"

"Don't know any more 'bout that than I know when he went. All I know fer cert'in is that if he *never* gits back I'm a blanket an' a camp-kettle ahead."

Congdon was annoyed. He had expected to settle the mystery at one blow.

For nearly an hour he sat there, hurling inquiries at Huckleberry, and scanning the plains.

"Can't stay any longer!" he declared, at last.

"The ole man'll be apt to tie me down with unhealthy questions, ef I do. I wanted to see yer pardner mighty bad, but it'll have to go this trip. But, when he gits back talk to him p'intedly fer me, will you? Tell him about the gal, and say to him that ef he's reely Paul Monckton an' keers fer her a tall, he'll let her know that he's still in the land o' the livin'! I'd wade through fire fer that gal, an' I ain't her lover, an' ef Luke is Paul an' they's any man about him he'll take the kinks out o' this rope er bust it a-pullin'. You hear me!"

Huckleberry heartily promised compliance, and the cowboy rode furiously away.

Then the little man climbed to the top of the ridge and sat there for a long time, apparently forgetful of the fact that he had not breakfasted.

At length he started up with a cry.

A horseman emerged from an arroya less than a mile away, and advanced toward the stream.

"It's *him*!" he ejaculated. "Grievin' love! What's he been doin' off in that direction? The more I figger, the more the ciphers keeps gittin' on the wrong side o' the decimal p'int an' countin' nothin'! An' the more I try to swim, the nearer I come to bein' drowned in a sea o' doubt, an' deviosities! I'll hev to knock myself on the head, I will, to keep from goin' crazy!"

Luke was not long in reaching the stream—a mere rivulet—through which he dashed.

"Didn't think I'd be gone so long," he exclaimed, as he leaped down, "or I would have left a card of explanation!"

Huckleberry gave a queer twist to his withered face; and, advancing, tapped Luke solemnly on the shoulder.

"It's in the air, pardner! I felt it yisterday; and to-day it's a-thickenin' up like maple sugar. I hope you won't think the less o' me fer sayin' so, but it's in the air!"

He gave his head such a lugubrious shake that his peaked hat almost toppled off.

Luke stared in evident mystification.

"What is in the air?"

"Suspicion, pardner! You know I warned you yisterday! Dark, cold, cruel suspicion! There's a girl, pardner, that's a-weepin' herself to shadders. Act'illy a-irrigatin' her bowdwar with a flood o' briny, scaldin' tears; an' all fer a feller that looks like you. Now, pardner, honest Injun, air you the man? If you air—go to her, if the road is lined with Winchester's an' dynamite, and hanged ef I don't back you!"

There was such a serious look on Huckleberry's face that Luke could not doubt his entire earnestness and sincerity.

The words evidently touched him; but he only laughed lightly, as he replied:

"I believe you would, Huckleberry, and if I needed your services in that line, you may be sure I wouldn't desire a better backer. But, you're *away* off, as the saying goes! Where do you suppose I was this morning, that you should grow so suspicious?"

"That's what Jim Congdon, the cowboy,

wanted to know awhile back. He's one o' Garlan's men; and he come over intendin' to look you square in the eyes and put that question—jes' as I did. Bein' as he couldn't, I went into the war as his substitoot. An' so ag'in, pardner, air you the man?"

This persistent doubt annoyed the young man; but, he kept his temper and replied, coolly:

"I might answer that question by asking another. And—I guess I will, Jonas, honest Injun, are you the simple-hearted philosopher from 'Way-Back that you represent yourself to be? Frankly, I *doubt* it!"

The shot was unexpected and proved a staggering one. It's like yellow-jack, when it's in the air *that* way. But, land o' love! I forgive ye; and hyer's my hand on't."

Las Animas Luke laughed.

"I suppose you'll be ready to hear my story without further interruption! Well, then, know ye by these presents, etc., that some time after midnight I heard a horse splash through the branch. I crawled out quicker'n a cat, Huckleberry, and took a peep. The moon was still up and it was almost as light as day. And who do you suppose that horseman was?"

"Cain't tell much more about it than the modern college gradyate kan about Greek!" Huckleberry declared, solemnly. "How sh'd I?"

"It was the *very* man we're after!"

Luke leaned over, his face all aglow with the importance of his information.

"Sho!" was all that Jonas could say.

"Yes! Of course I followed him; and the discoveries I made will, I fancy, be of considerable importance."

"And now that your suspicions are settled, and your curiosity gratified, let's proceed to modify the pangs of the inward man."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MOUNTAIN WOLVES.

FAR up in the mountain range a band of wild-looking men were congregated. That they were lawless renegades could be determined at a glance. They were principally Americans, but other nationalities were represented, and the swarthy and dark faces of a few Mexicans and Indians were to be seen.

They were mounted and, at the moment of introduction to the reader, were preparing to emerge from a sort of natural amphitheater into a small valley below.

This amphitheater, if it may be so called, was scooped out between the incircling crests of two ridges. Apparently there was only one way of egress; that leading to the valley. The walls arose in sheer precipices of rock or in dipping terraces that a goat could not scale. Nature had here seemingly formed a fortress that was well-nigh impregnable.

The route to the valley was cut out by the stream that carried away the melting snow and rainfall of the ridges. The torrent filled this narrow cut, and the horses of those ascending or descending would be forced to walk through the water. Plainly in times of storms and cloud-bursts no one could enter or leave the amphitheater by that path.

Now the stream was extremely low, the water singing merrily among the bowlders and pebbles, and scarcely reaching to a horse's fetlocks.

There was quite a village within the amphitheater. The houses were scattered about in an irregular way. Some were newer than others, indicating perhaps that they had been erected to accommodate the increasing numbers of the lawless band. All were of stout, unhewn logs.

The leader of the mounted outlaws wore a wolfskin cap, and his saddle sported a large wolfskin pad. He called himself Captain Ishmael Wolf; and had conferred upon his banded renegades the title of the Mountain Wolves. No doubt his name was an assumed one. It illustrated his character in too striking a manner to be his real name. But, then, men of his stamp usually change names with every change of location; and it is a question if any in his band bore the name given him by his mother.

Ishmael Wolf was tall and shambling in build, with a gaunt but powerful frame. Shifting, beady eyes, set in cavernous sockets and shielded by beetling and cliff-like brows; a long, curved nose, like the beak of an eagle; a wide, fang-filled mouth; and lantern jaws, were his facial characteristics. A wicked and cruel face; but it fitly and correctly represented his mentality.

He ran his beady eyes over the assembly of ruffians to see that all were there; and then gave the order to advance.

Instantly the little stream was churned into muddy foam, as the outlaws rode down toward the valley. They were evidently in excellent spirits, for they laughed and joked in a rough, fierce way, and even Captain Ishmael unbent occasionally and joined in their mirth.

They had scarcely emerged into the valley when a sentinel who had been posted on a neighboring ridge, hurried toward them, making rapid signals with his hands.

"Back into the bushes, ye wolf-cubs!" the leader exclaimed, as he saw those wavering signals. "There's somethin' a-stirrin'. Eff't's a

fight, we're ready! Ishmael's Wolves don't 'low any travelers on this side o' the range. No! There's a valley o' bones, picked an' clean; not more'n a mile away, kin testify to that!"

He glanced at his men with a grim smile, that revealed his fang-like teeth, in all their cruel repulsiveness.

The men fell back out of sight, as commanded, but Captain Ishmael awaited the approach of the sentinel, with whom he conferred in low, eager tones.

"There's only one o' 'em!" he shouted, when the conference had ended. "He's a-comin' along the trail there, goin' to the town likely. We don't want that trail traveled over more'n we kin help. Shell we rake him in?"

He was answered by a chorus of eager affirmatives.

"Rake it is, then! He's a good ways off yit, an' we'll ride down to the crossin'. I 'low he'll cave rather suddint when we raise on him out'n the bresh."

He laughed in a disagreeable way; and his men, taking his words for a command, came out of their concealment and straggled after him in single file.

The trail was not much used and, at the point where it crossed the stream, was very dim and faint.

The stream was lined with a scrubby growth that afforded an excellent covert and in this scrub the outlaws again ensconced themselves.

Soon a little pony, bearing a gawky youth, whose half-open mouth and protruding, watery eyes seemed staring alike at all things, came into view around a bend in the trail.

The pony was taking its own time, and the rider was lazily bobbing his head and swinging his long legs in unison with its movements. In one hand he clutched the bridle-rein and in the other carried some small article, neatly tied up in a paper parcel.

All unconscious of the presence of the fierce bandits he came on. His pony shied and endeavored to back away, as it reached the stream; but he lashed it across. And then—

Ishmael's men rode out of the fringing scrub, and he found himself crescented with gleaming Winchesters.

With a yell of terror and dismay the youth lurched backward, unseating himself and tumbling helplessly to the ground, where he lay groveling in abject fear.

"Oh, don't shoot! Don't shoot!" he pleaded.

Captain Ishmael rode forward, laughing.

"Git up!" he said. "We won't hurt ye, ef you talk straight."

"Oh, mister, I ain't done nothin'! Honest, I ain't! Don't shoot, please!"

He attempted to obey, but fell back, weak and trembling.

"We won't hurt ye!" Ishmael repeated, still laughing. "That is, ef you tell the truth. Ef you lie, though—"

He gave his revolver a fierce tug, sending the cold shivers in a torrent along the young man's spine.

"Oh, I'll tell the truth. Jest try me! I ain't done nothin' to lie about!"

"Yer name, then, young feller!" showing his fang-like teeth in a fierce way.

"Ezekiel Taylor, sir!" with a pant and a sniff.

"Well an' good! Zeke'll do, though. We ain't dudes, we ain't; an' a man hasn't got time, in this section, to carry too hefty a handle. I thought you was Taylor's boy!"

"Now, whar' air ye goin'?"

"To the post-office up in the mount'ins, sir!"

Captain Ishmael was again showing his fang-like teeth.

"An' that's a letter ye've got wropped up there so keerful?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Gimme it!"

Zeke wanted to refuse; but he dared not, and so handed the letter over with the best grace possible.

"Oh, but I'll git it!" he moaned, as Ishmael ruthlessly tore the envelope open.

The latter indulged in a series of fiendish chuckles as he slowly read the letter.

"Come up yer!" he said to the horsemen, who were watching the performance with smiling curiosity. "There's rich times fer us ahead, er I miss my figgerin'! The devil's let loose on the plains!"

With much alacrity they drew near, and he proceeded to read the communication aloud. Ishmael was not a good reader and the letter was neither spelled nor worded very accurately. Therefore the substance of it must suffice.

It was from Gabe Taylor to an Eastern acquaintance. After "taking his pen in hand" and doing considerable preliminary skirmishing he proceeded to detail at length the rivalry and warlike animosity existing between John Garland and Colonel Miles Monckton, together with all the facts which had led to the recent outbreak.

It was just such a letter as any uneducated man would write to a friend, giving the neighborhood gossip and inserting the Garland-Monckton feud as an especially spicy bit of news.

"Rich, ain't it?" queried Ishmael, placing it

again in the envelope and dropping it into his pocket. "There's allus pickin' fer the Mountain Wolves where there's a racket like that goin' on. Shell we take a hand, er not?"

Zeke had struggled to his feet and now stood pantingly before the dreaded chief, his fears and his sense of duty fighting for the mastery.

"Why, what d'ye want?" snarled Ishmael.

"The letter!" Zeke sputtered, his eyes rolling. "Pap'll everlastin'ly tan me ef I don't put it into the post-office. His orders was very purtick'ler!"

"An' would you put it in, with the env'lop tore that-a-way?" asked the chief, casting an amused glance at the tickled bandits. "Why, it's a pennytensherry offense to put a letter like that into the post-office. I'm s'prised at yer ignorance. You'd have these hills jest a-swarm-in' with off'sers."

"I'll risk it!" asserted Zeke, still extending his hand. It began to dawn on him that they were now chaffing him. "I'll git some 'un to 'dress a new env'lop!"

"No, sonny, I jest couldn't think o' it, I couldn't. I ain't a-goin' to let you run yerself into difficulty, after the service you've done us. There's information in that letter, an' I'm goin' to hang onto it."

"Lemme have it!" pleaded Zeke.

Ishmael waved his hand in answer.

There was an ominous clicking of gun-locks and Zeke found himself looking into a dozen deadly tubes. He started back, clasping his hands in terror.

"Now, see yer', my young mount'in-lion! I'm a-goin' to keep this letter. An' I'm a-goin' to let you go, providin'! Kin you go on down the mount'in an' never let on to no one that we met ye? If ye kin, you may go; ef not—"

He bobbed his head toward the threatening Winchesters.

"Make up yer mind, quick. Time's as precious as a gold mine. We ain't got nothin' ag'in' you. Fact is we're rather obleeged to you. But you've got to promise to keep yer head shet on what you've seen and heered up yer', er we'll proceed to make a cold corpus out o' you right away!"

Zeke was trembling like a leaf. The gleam of those threatening, beady eyes and the hideous suggestiveness of the cruel, yellow teeth, almost paralyzed him.

"Lemme go!" he cried. "I won't say nothin'.

Please, mister, lemme go!"

"An' without the letter!"

"Yes! yes! Ef you'll jest lemme go!"

"Straddle yer horse, then, an' cut! Take the back track, mind you, an' ef you look this way onc't—jest onc't—"

The blauk was more horribly threatening than words.

"Yes! yes!" Zeke howled, scrambling frantically into the saddle.

He pulled the pony around with a nervous jerk, dashed through the stream and rode wildly back along the trail. Wild-eyed and trembling, he spurred on, crouching low as if to avoid an expected shot. Not once did he turn his head, and the bend in the trail soon shut him from sight.

Then Captain Ishmael leaned back in his saddle and roared with devilish glee, his men joining in like a chorus.

CHAPTER XVII.

FOOL AND PHILOSOPHER.

ALONG in the afternoon of the same day Jonas Huckleberry was sitting on a boulder in the rugged country bordering the foot-hills, lazily watching his horse, as it cropped the short, sweet grass.

Luke was away, and had been for hours, searching for a certain trail which he believed entered the foot-hills near that point.

Jonas had declined to accompany him on the search, which he considered largely visionary. The reasons for expecting such a trail did not seem to him strong enough to warrant the extra exertion.

And—must I confess it?—Jonas was almost exhausted. Well seasoned as were his muscles he could not cope with Las Animas Luke, who was apparently as tireless as a machine.

Such a chase as Luke had led the little man, despite the latter's grumbling protest and half-flayed condition!

"An' yit we hain't there! The secret lays in them mountains; an' I'm afraid it's goin' to be as hard to find as the treasury that Capt'n Kidd dropped into the sea—as he sailed, as he sailed!"

The grumbling comment was checked by the hoof-strokes of a horse.

Huckleberry looked up in quick surprise. He had not expected a horse to approach from that direction. He drew a revolver and dropped behind the boulder, like a turtle slipping from a log.

When the horse came in sight, Huckleberry was surprised to notice that it was dripping with sweat, and reeled as if it had been pushed for hours at the top of its speed. The rider was in little better condition. He was pale, wild-eyed and hatless. Only his terror kept him in the saddle.

It was Zeke Taylor. For hours he had spurred his pony on, every bush seeming a horse-man with threatening Winchester. Only when

the poor beast stumbled and showed signs of utter exhaustion did he suffer it to slacken its gait. He was beginning to feel more at ease now; but his fears of pursuit kept him traveling.

When Huckleberry covered him with the revolver and sung out, in a piping voice, for him to halt, Zeke almost went into convulsions. He was sure he had again fallen into the hands of the Mountain Wolves.

"Why—I—I thought you said you'd lemme go, ef I wouldn't look back!" he pleaded. "An' I hain't! I hain't looked back onc't!"

Huckleberry laughed in his queer, chuckling way, as he came out from behind the rock.

"Fu'st time in my life I knowed that I looked like anybody else."

Zeke stared in bewilderment. Then he twisted half-way round in the saddle, only to wrench himself back with a sudden jerk.

"I—I dassent!" he cried. "Will you look, mister? Is they anybody a-comin'? You don't belong to 'em, do you?"

He made a wry face, rolled his eyes fearfully, and clapped a big, brown hand over his mouth.

"Don't see nothin'!" Jonas averred, peering past him. "Who was you speakin' of? I don't belong to anybody!"

Zeke only moaned, and rocked disconsolately in the saddle.

"Who was you talkin' 'bout?" Jonas asked, sharply, a shade of suspicion in his ferret-like eyes.

Zeke glued the palm of his hand to his mouth and refused to answer.

His suspicions thus awakened, Huckleberry would not be put off.

"Mortal mutes! An' so you don't keer to talk to a gentleman 'bout my size? An' that, after thinkin' you knowed him! Friend, what hev I done?"

Zeke's only reply was an appealing glance out of his big, watery eyes.

"My name's Huckleberry! Jonas Huckleberry! Now what does yer frien's call you when dinner's ready?" said Jonas, taking another tack.

The big, brown hand fell from the lips.

"Zeke!"

"That's a good Bible name, Zeke is. An' what's the tail of it?"

"Taylor! Zeke Taylor!"

Zeke was slowly gaining courage.

Huckleberry gave a slight start, came up to the young man and peered eagerly into his face.

"An' what might be yer paw's name? That is, supposin' you hev one?"

"Gabe Taylor!" Zeke answered promptly.

"Um-hub! An' was you a-runnin' from him jes' now?"

"No! I was a—that is—oh, don't ax me, stranger!"

"So you wasn't a-runnin' from him! Who was you a-runnin' from?" tapping his revolver significantly. "Might's well speak out. You'll hev to!"

"I can't! I dassent!" Zeke wailed, putting out his hands as if to ward off a blow.

"Like the man who had the b'ar by the tail, hey? Well, I'm sorry fer ye! But if there's a b'ar on that side, there's a wild-cat on this. I'm the wild-cat! The other chap's fuder away than I am; and the closest danger is allus the wu'st. That's been my experience, young man."

"So you'll hev to choose between b'ar an' wild-cat!"

"I suppose you tol' the feller you wouldn't tell?"

"Yes!" confessed Zeke, coweringly. "I promised, ef they'd lemme go!"

"Then there was several o' 'em? This yer's gittin' as int'restin' as a story book! Go on!"

"But they said they'd shoot me ef I opened my head!" wailed the unhappy youth.

Huckleberry, now that his curiosity was fully aroused, was as immovable as granite.

"An' I'll shoot ye, ef you don't!" he grated, pressing the muzzle of the revolver against the young man's breast. "Spit it out, now, without more monkeyin'! I'm gittin' tired. Yes; pesky tired!"

Zeke Taylor almost tumbled from the saddle, so great was his terror.

There could be no mistake in Huckleberry's manner. He was terribly in earnest. Here was information that might be valuable and he meant to have it.

Zeke wriggled and twisted and coughed. Huckleberry was unbending; and dragged the story bit by bit from the terrified youth.

"Now, why couldn't you hev told all that without cuttin' up sich didoes?" Huckleberry growled, when he had learned everything. "Had to squeeze you as if you was a lemon! You've heerd o' the man that jumped out o' the fryin'-pan plum into the fire! Well, you was a-doin' that, young man, jes' a little while ago. An' lemme tell you that fire would hev burnt."

"Now, if you'll lissen to me, I'll say what I think 'bout that bizness. P'raps you won't agree with me, but that don't make any difference. They was jes' a-foolin' you. They was a-playin' with you, an' fer a purpose! I know it. I can't give you my reasons fer thinkin' so now. Mebbe I will some day. When I do you'll stretch yer eyes till they'll jes' natcherly hang

over like a toad's. Mark that down in your men's-randum-book fer future ref'rance. It'll come true, every word of it.

"Don't believe it, eh?" as Zeke gave a doubting shake to his head. "Well, the Jews didn't believe Joner an' the prophets. I can't blame ye. Weepin' love, why sh'ud you believe it? It's jes' the maunderin's o' an' ole man. That's what you think, I s'pose. But mark my words, it'll come true."

He had climbed again to the big boulder, and now buried his face in his hands, as if pondering deeply.

Zeke did not offer to stir, and Huckleberry soon looked up with a queer smile.

"Hev to be told to go on, eh? Sh'ud think you'd jes' split the air soon's I turned round. You've been held up so much, that you make me think o' a cow that's got used to a picket-rope. She'll stand when the rope's on her head, whether it's tied er not."

The homely illustration pleased Zeke, and, for a wonder, he broke into a hearty laugh.

"Yes; you can go on. You can keep yer mouth shet er open, jes' as you please, s'fer's I'm concerned, when you git home. If your paw should ast you who I am, tell him that my name's Jonas Huckleberry, an' that I send him my most earnest respects!"

A mysterious smile hovered about the thin lips. But Zeke was far too anxious to proceed to notice so small a matter.

When the gawky form had disappeared, Huckleberry doubled himself up on the rock and gave way to an outburst of almost silent laughter.

"Sweet posies o' delight! If you want the truth, go to fools and children. Solomon wouldn't hev had no need to talk about dividin' that baby, if them women had on'y been jes' a leetle light-headed."

CHAPTER XVIII. WILD RIDERS.

A PAINTED face, surmounted by a feathered head-dress, peered out from behind a high rock near the base of the foot-hills. Below, the rough country and the wide, flat plains, intersected here and there by deep gulches and arroyas, lay spread out like a huge map.

Far away toward the east could be seen the Garland Ranch buildings. Further north, like a group of nesting birds, squatted the Monckton houses. The foreground was filled with grazing herds. Occasionally a lonely line-rider could be seen as he picked his way along the boundaries of a range, a mere speck in that vast reach of earth and sky. Over all was poured the mellowing light of a sun midway toward the western horizon.

It was a scene that suggested peace, repose, happiness and plenty. It did not seem possible that burning hearts, fierce jealousies, and bitter enmities could exist amid the quiet of that restful, pastoral life. Still less that it should ever become the arena of combat, bloodshed and conflagration.

The painted face drew back out of sight. Five minutes later a band of mounted Indians rode from among the rocks and descended in single file toward the plains. Judging by paint and head-dress, they were Utes on a foray.

At about the same hour, Jim Congdon was not far from the extreme western boundary of the Garland range. He had been on a visit to a line-house which lay in the very edge of the foot-hills. Now he was on his return trip.

Once he deviated from his course to circle a herd of straying cattle. An hour was taken up in this. Then he again turned toward home.

Suddenly he heard a thundering of hoofs. Several bunches of cattle had stampeded at the same time. Strangely enough, they united after a short run and came on in a whirlwind of dust, and with a tread that shook the ground.

Congdon's first impulse was to spur toward them and attempt to swerve them in the direction of the open plains. He could not understand what had caused the stampede. One herd might have been frightened by a mountain lion or a prowling wolf, and by degrees the fright would communicate from herd to herd until a general panic would result. But this stampede had not come about in that way. The flying herds had started at almost the same time, as if urged on by a single exciting cause.

Before he could put his first impulse into execution, Congdon saw that the wide-reaching dust-cloud was bearing straight down upon him, with a speed almost equal to the wind. Out of that flying dust-cloud came a chorus of frightened bellows and occasional glimpses of a crowding mass of hairy coats, tossing horns and fiery eyes.

It was a situation to test the nerves of the strongest. He could possibly swerve the excited cattle if he could make them see or hear him. The human voice would be swallowed up in that thundering din, and the veil of dust shut out almost everything from the sight of the herd.

There was no safety in flight. The wings now extended far to either side. If he could gain the rocky foot-hills he would be secure; but one wing lapped over almost to their verge. A desperate ride straight northward seemed his only hope of escape. The pony was dancing

about, eager to be away; and Congdon once turned it half-way 'round, intending to loose it like an arrow from the bow.

Then he set his teeth with a grim determination. He would face the flying herd. He would separate it. With his revolver, if necessary. He believed he could pile up such a heap of slain cattle that the thundering mass would be compelled to divide and he could find safety in the shelter of the carcass formed pyramid.

This was not merely the resolve of a rash and headstrong man, careless alike of human and animal life. Jim Congdon loved his herds, and was the last man in the world to wantonly kill a steer. But in the midst of the din and tumult he imagined he had heard the shout of a human voice. The maddened animals acted very much as if they had been frightened into a stampede by rustlers. Whatever the risk and cost he determined to verify his suspicions or prove them groundless.

So he held his snorting horse firmly in front of that onrushing dust-cloud, drew out and carefully examined his deadly, self-cocking revolver, and coolly awaited the terrible onset.

The thunder of hoofs grew into a roar like that of Niagara, the ground trembled and shook, the billowing mass of tapering and cruel horns came closer and closer. Then, with a surge and a rush the herd was upon him.

Once, twice, thrice, the deadly revolver rung out, the slain brutes falling in quivering heaps almost at his feet. The swaying herd parted like a dividing tide, and streamed on, a living sea of hairy, dusty coats. The pony trembled like a leaf, but Congdon held it there with a hand of iron; his revolver uplifted, ready to pile higher the sheltering heap of slain animals should that become necessary.

As he sat there with strained muscles, set lips and flashing eyes, the divided herd pouring by on each side like living streams, the wild and startling yells of a band of Utes came to his ears. Peering through the enveloping dust-cloud, he could catch faint glimpses of the moving of parti-colored blankets and the galloping forms of horsemen.

This was an emergency he had not expected. He had thought the perpetrators of the outrage white men; miserable, sneaking ruffians, few in numbers and not overly blessed with fighting courage. With such men he had had several encounters, and his scorn and contempt of them was fully as great as his hatred. A brush with half a dozen single-handed would have afforded him supreme delight.

The presence of this band of Utes placed a different face upon the matter. They generally raided in strong parties; and slew mercilessly and even without provocation such white men as came in their way. Could he hold this force of wild riders at bay? Could he escape them should they discover him? And that they must discover him seemed inevitable.

His position was certainly one of extreme peril. He had escaped one danger only to be hurled upon another. The hemming herds effectually cut off all chances of flight. He could go neither to the right nor to the left; neither forward nor backward. Horse and rider were held there as if bound.

Still the sea of hairy backs poured by, red and mottled and dun, with an occasional dash of white, like the foam on the crest of a wave. Not a line on Congdon's face suggested that he was not the center of a scene of peace and quiet. Perhaps his blue eyes held more of a steely glitter than usual. But he was calm. Deathly calm!

He threw the empty shells out of the revolver he had been using and reloaded it carefully, clicking the cylinder around to see that it was in perfect working order. Then he drew the remaining revolver from his belt and examined it with a critical eye.

The stragglers of the great herd were now passing him; and the yells of the Utes were suggestively and uncomfortably near.

He placed the bridle rein between his teeth, gripped a revolver in either hand and awaited the fatal moment of discovery.

The lowering cloud-dust faded him; and the discovery did not come until the last of the herd had thundered by.

Congdon was swerving his horse around by bending over and pressing one knee against its shoulder, when the yell arose announcing that he had been seen.

Leaning forward in the saddle he dug his spurs into the pony's flanks. It shot forward like a sped arrow. Two of the Indians attempted to head him off, doubtless to keep him from carrying away a report of their doings.

Congdon saw them coming, and his eyes took on a glare that was dangerous. He straightened up, dropped the bridle-rein, sent a defiant shout as an answer to their yells, then lifted his deadly revolvers. Twin streams of fire came from them. One of the Utes toppled over and the other rushed madly away, having received a ball in the shoulder.

The other Utes were to the rear and off at one side. Congdon twisted around in the saddle and opened fire upon them. The position was not one conducive to accurate aim, and it must be

remembered also that his pony was in rapid motion. To his chagrin the balls found no lodgment either in man or beast.

Life was distancing them, however, and turned again to urge his pony into increased speed. Then came a return volley from the pursuers. Congdon reeled, swayed heavily and fell to the earth. One foot caught in a stirrup and for an instant it seemed that, if not already dead, he would be dragged to death. But, the stirrup released its hold and he dropped, apparently lifeless, on the grass: while the frightened pony dashed madly away.

Two hours later the seemingly lifeless form moved slightly. A groan came from the lips of the sorely wounded man. Then, a little later, he opened his eyes and attempted, feebly, to sit up. His face was chalk-like beneath the tan; his breath came in quick, hard gasps; his shirt and underclothing were saturated with blood, and his head spun round like a top.

Congdon had been near to death's door, and was now by no means out of danger. To use his own expressive phrase, when speaking of it afterward, he "was surprised to find himself yet alive."

The plains showed little signs of the turmoil to which they had been recently subjected. The wild riders and the flying herds were gone. The grass was cloven into dust-like cluff, it is true—sole indication of the passage of the stampeding cattle. The dead Ute and the wounded pony had also disappeared.

Congdon's horse, however, had remained faithful to its master, in spite of terror and bewildering fear. It had returned to the place where Congdon had fallen and was smelling of the powdered grass, only a few yards away.

Congdon's eyes lighted with gratitude and pride, when he saw it. He called the docile animal to him, rubbed its nose with his horny palm and tried to make it comprehend his emotions of gratefulness and joy. The smell of the fresh blood which dyed his clothing frightened it at first, but his soothing tones quickly banished the feeling.

Then, when it came quite close to him, he gripped the long hairs of its tail and slowly and painfully drew himself erect. He was still so weak that he had to cling tightly to the stirrup-leathers to keep from falling.

"Rather a close call, old boy!" he said, patting the pony affectionately. "I got that Ute's bullet square through my left shoulder. Knocked me clean out of time fer a little while, it did! An' I reckon I've lost a gallon of blood more er less. But I'm better'n ten dead men yit!"

The horse seemed to understand the words. It turned its head and pressed its soft muzzle against his face.

"Don't exactly understand how it come that them devils left me. 'Tain't Ute style. An Injun is allus hankerin' fer a feller's hair. It's more like rustlers to bowl a chap over that way and leave him fer the wolves to pick."

His strength was coming back to him and he ran his eyes slowly over the plains in the direction taken by the stampeded herds. The sun was yet an hour high.

"Thar ain't no good hidin'-place fer them steers in the foot-hills, s'fur's I know. Ef a chase was commenced now they could be got back."

He looked longingly off in the direction of the Garland Ranch.

"Ef Garland on'y had word!"

He set his teeth with a click.

"It's a good ride fer a well man; but I'll do it er die!"

CHAPTER XIX.

ZEKE TAYLOR'S GRIEF.

JIM CONGDON climbed heavily and painfully into the deep saddle. Once firmly seated, he had little fear of falling out, no matter how weak he might become, if that weakness did not take on the form of unconsciousness.

It was a long, hard ride to the Garland buildings, sufficient, as he had said, to test the powers of a strong man. Could he make it in his present condition?

His hurt was beginning to bleed afresh. The wound was low down. A rib, or two, had been splintered by the passage of the ball, but no other bones broken, so far as he could ascertain. Yet the arm hung limp and useless. He tore his handkerchief into bandages and applied them as well as he could; but the work was not satisfactory and the wound continued to bleed.

But he never faltered in that firm resolve to reach the Garland Ranch or die in the attempt.

He dropped the rein on the pony's neck, clung weakly to the high pommel and urged the animal into a gentle canter. The easy, rocking motion did not greatly disturb the wound and the bleeding ceased again, after a time. But Congdon was weak, oh, so weak! Weak even unto faintness.

Occasionally his brain reeled and a pall of darkness seemed shutting out the daylight; but he only closed his teeth with a more determined click and gripped the pommel the tighter. Mile after mile went by, the sun sunk behind the mountains, and the shadows began to creep far out on the plains.

Suddenly a light shot upward, from some

point near the foot-hills, mingling with the red glory of the sunset sky. Later another made its appearance further out on the plains. Others yet were added to these as the darkness fell.

"The Utes air a-burnin' out the line-camps and the shanties o' hunters," muttered Congdon, as he watched the lights. "That'll wake up the ole man, even ef I don't git thar. Sing'lar what fools them Injuns air. They jest can't resist the temptation to do devilment, even when they know it'll 'rouse the bull country."

He had caught sight of the ranch-buildings before the sun went down. They were then mere specks in the dim distance, but the sight gave him hope and courage. He was making progress. Not such progress as he desired to make but it was better than lying helplessly and inactively on the plains.

He realized, however, that his powers were failing, and he began to question if he could complete the ride. Hence the sight of the fires, which under other circumstances would have infuriated him, pleased him.

Another hour of that rocking canter brought him correspondingly nearer the ranch-house, and also found him appreciably fainter. He reeled now, with an occasional heavy lurch that almost dismounted him. His frame quivered from the long strain, his lips were dry and parched and a fever flashed and burned through his veins. Objects lost their distinct outlines and took on a hazy and blurred appearance. But he clung tenaciously to the saddle. Uncertain as his ideas were becoming, the resolve to reach the ranch-house and spread the warning never faltered. It was the one thought into which all others, fading, concentrated their force and strength.

The lights from the windows now rose and fell before him as the pony, worn, weary and panting, cantered on. Occasionally, as he reeled or lurched heavily, they waved in fiery circles or turned meteoric somersets against the black background of the night. Sometimes in his dizzier moods, they seemed swimming and dipping across the horizon like a troop of ghostly jack-o'-lanterns. But the fact that they were there, no matter what eccentricity of form or motion they took on, summoned his little remaining strength for a last effort.

Then the houses loomed indistinctly, he heard the sound of voices and the sentient earth slipped from him.

When he awoke it was with a dash of water in his face. His wound had been bandaged, and he was lying on a little cot in an upper room of the building. Garland was bending over him with an anxious look, Gladys held one of his hands in her own soft palms, and several cowboys were standing about.

"Coming around all right, eh?" Garland questioned, in a cheery voice, as Congdon opened his eyes. "We thought you were gone, for a while. It's a wonder you ever held up to get home, with that hole knocked in your shoulder. It's enough to have downed a grizzly."

Congdon started up with a questioning look.

"Has anybody gone after the Injuns?"

"It was Indians, then?"

"Yes; and they've driv' off a power o' stock. They was a-burnin' shanties an' line-houses about dark."

"We saw the fires!" said Garland. "But you mustn't worry yourself! You can't stand much more. Everything was in readiness for a movement, when you came in. The line-riders ought to be here directly, if they are alive."

Congdon protested that he was not weak; and, in spite of their desires to the contrary, he sat up in the cot and related the events of the afternoon, so far as he was cognizant of them.

"They made for the foot-hills, no doubt!" inferred Garland. "We can't pick up the trail to-night. But we will be in the edge of the hills ready for work at the first light in the morning. I have ordered in all the men I can reach and will start now in a very short time. So, you can rest easy on that score. We'll get the cattle back and punish those fellows, if we have to follow them across the mountains!"

The answer satisfied Congdon and he closed his eyes in a weary way.

"Would like to help you!" he said, a little later, looking up feebly. "But I'm done fer this trip!"

He closed his eyes again, and soon passed into deep and heavy slumber.

Notwithstanding his statement that he would move soon, Garland was not able to leave the ranch-house until after midnight. He left four men behind, including Congdon. He felt that if he expected to accomplish anything he could not further weaken his force; and then he had no fears that the raiders would double on that trail and menace the ranch-buildings.

Two line-riders had come in. Their camp had been destroyed, but they had managed to escape to the brush before the Utes came up. Whether other line-riders had been equally fortunate they could not, of course, tell.

The new fires that continued to spring up, now in the foot-hills, pointed out the course to be followed.

Garland first visited the destroyed line-camps that were not too far out of the direct route. At only one did he find the body of a slain line-

rider. The unfortunate man had evidently attempted a defense of the place and had been mercilessly shot down.

The pursuing force halted long enough to heap a pile of stones over the body, to keep away prowling beasts, and then pushed on.

They reached the rough country bordering the foot-hills quite awhile before daylight. But from that on their progress was necessarily slow, and when day broke they had scarcely got to the edge of the hills.

The smoke from burning hunters' huts curled upward from a number of points in that early morning light. It seemed only an act of common humanity to visit such of these as they could; and they accordingly started for the nearest.

It was the shanty of Gabe Taylor. When they reached it a pathetic and fantastic scene was presented. Zeke Taylor was bobbing wildly about in the red firelight, circling the flames in a hysterical way, and occasionally digging among the ashes and glowing embers with a long pole.

When he saw them approaching, he picked up some article from the ground, waved it about his head and rushed toward them shrieking.

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear! Pap's killed. Pap's burnt all into chips, Mr. Garland! Oh, what shall I do? 'Twas Injuns done it. See there!"

He held up the article. It was a Ute head-dress.

"They've killed him! Yes; they've killed him!" he sobbed. "An' 'twas Injuns! Found that a-laying on the grass right in front o' the door. They sot fire to the house, Mr. Garland, an' burnt him up!"

"Perhaps he wasn't at home when they came!" suggested Garland, trying to soothe the distressed and excited youth. "You escaped; and I have no doubt that he did."

"But I wasn't at home las' night. I'd rid so fur that I plum tuckered out and had to camp on the trail. Pap was to home; fer I left him hyer yistiday mornin' and he wasn't talkin' 'bout goin' anywhere. An' now I rec'lect he told me he would stay hyer tell I got back!"

The memory brought on another ebullition of grief and despair.

"How did it happen that you had ridden so far?" Garland asked, more for the purpose of changing the current of the young man's thoughts than anything else.

Zeke's whole attitude underwent a sudden change.

"Oh, don't ast me, Mr. Garland!" he pleaded. "I promised I wouldn't tell. An' I had to break my word onc't already!"

Naturally this only whetted Garland's curiosity.

"I can't tell!" Zeke protested. "'Deed I can't! You're a friend o' our fambly, an' I'd tell you sooner'n anybody, ef I dast tol'!"

"But you say you have already told some one. How is that?" Garland questioned.

"Had to er git shot!"

Zeke screwed his face away as he gave this innocent answer.

"I kin tell you 'bout that; fer the feller didn't make me promise not to. I was comin' from the mountains, lickity split, an' so skeered I could hardly set in the saddle, when this feller popped out from behind a big rock and pulled a gun on me."

"He was a little, dried-up chap, and he said he was a huckleberry an' ef I didn't spit out what I was runnin' so fer he'd put a bullet into me; an' so I told him."

"And if I should say the same you would tell me?"

Garland laughed a little, as he drew and cocked a revolver.

But the sight of the weapon failed to have the desired effect. Zeke merely grinned.

"Oh, I know you, Mr. Garland. You wouldn't shoot me, bein' as we're all frien's, as I might say. I ain't a bit afraid o' that gun! Not a bit—unless it should go off accidental!"

Garland threatened, and fumed, and raged. Zeke was adamant. He wasn't afraid of the weapon, he insisted, unless it should go off by accident, and he was willing to take the chances on that. He declared that he couldn't tell, and he wouldn't!

"Come on!" said Garland, to his cowboys. He was disgusted at his failure and annoyed at the loss of time.

"But hain't you a-goin' to help me look fer pap?" Zeke wailed. "He's burnt up, I tell ye! I hain't a shadder o' doubt on it. An' the Injuns done it. Look at that head-riggin'!"

"What do you want us to do?" asked Garland, shortly. "I don't hardly think he was burnt in the shanty. But if he was, he was, and that ends it!"

"Oh, but I want ye to help me look fer him. He's in there! I know he is!"

Zeke again picked up the long pole and began to prod among the embers.

"See here, Zeke!" said Garland, striving to speak kindly, in spite of his haste and annoyance. "I'm sorry for you and would like to help you in a search for your father. Not among those ashes, but out in the hills. He may have been injured and crawled away. I haven't the time, however."

"It is quite probable that if he is alive he is all right. If he is alive and not all right, the chances are that he was captured by the Utes. In that case our pursuit will bring us to him in course of time. They cannot drive the cattle very fast, and we are bound to overhaul the rascals soon. They made a mess of it, as usual, by firing these buildings."

"Now if you want to aid in a search for your father, your best plan is to come with us. That will be practical. It is nonsense to continue poking about in that fire!"

"Oh, but I know he's in hyer!" Zeke insisted, giving another prod with his pole. "And I'm bound to find him. Ef I diskiver he ain't, mebbe I'll foller ye. Ef you'd gimme jest a little help, Mr. Garland! We c'd 'tar this thing all to pieces in less'n an hour!"

Tears of pleading actually stood in the eyes of poor, honest, simple-minded Zeke. He firmly believed that his father had perished in that fire, and he had determined to find his bones, if they were not entirely destroyed, and give them respectful burial.

Garland at last understood the lad's true feelings.

"I would do it, Zeke, if I had time!" he said, earnestly. But, I must push on after those cattle. I have already tarried too long. If you will not come with me, I hope you may find—"

He checked himself, and then added: "I know your father is alive, and you will have your labor for your pains! But I do not blame you."

He gave the order, and the little force advanced into the hills. Looking back, when they had gained a distant knoll, they saw Zeke once more dodging about in the red firelight, and searching with that long pole among the glowing ruins.

CHAPTER XX.

UNDECEIVED.

AFTER Garland had left the ranch-house with his force, one of the cowboys came up-stairs to take charge of the wounded man, and Gladys went to her own room. The two cowboys, remaining, retired to the stable.

No trouble was anticipated, and only a perfunctory watch was kept. The cowboys discussed the events of the night; then, as they began to grow sleepy, one of them rolled over upon the hay, and the other rubbed his eyes and began his vigil.

He circled the ranch buildings a few times to drive away the sleepy feeling that possessed him, and then seated himself in the stable-door. But the sleepy feeling returned, and he was soon nodding at his post.

The cowboy whose duty it was to watch at Congdon's bedside, was not more wakeful. As for Congdon, he was oblivious to all things earthly. Occasionally he rolled and tossed in an uneasy way, muttering unintelligible sentences. For the most part, however, he was wrapped in a slumber so deep that it suggested the sleep of death.

An hour, then another, slipped quietly away. Then the sleepy sentinels were aroused by a wild shriek. The grounds were filled with horsemen, and the house swarmed with armed men.

That shriek brought Congdon out of his deathlike stupor. He started up, stared wildly about him, an insane light gleaming in his eyes, and then sprung from the bed with one bound. His flaming eyes lighted upon a revolver banging against the wall; and, as that wild scream was repeated, he threw open the door leading from the stairway and rushed into the hall.

He seemed to have no realization of his wounded condition. His injured arm swung uselessly at his side, but he appeared not to know it. That shriek was a cable tied about his heart, dragging him on almost without purpose or volition.

But, when he heard the fierce oaths below, and the heavy tread of men, his form dilated and the insane light in his eyes assumed a fierce intensity. With a howl like the scream of an enraged tiger, he sprung for the stairway.

The cowboy watcher was scarcely less active. His first impulse was to leap upon Congdon and attempt to force him back into the bed; but that fierce look deterred him. He saw it was a feat impossible of accomplishment. Then, as the scream came again, he seized his own weapons and pressed close at Congdon's heels.

The door leading into the hall below was open, and the dim light revealed the forms of several men. Congdon raised his weapon, gave a terrible yell, and fired shot after shot, as he bounded down the stairway.

The cowboy added his shouts to that terrible cry, and also began a reckless fusillade.

Their firing was responded to by a volley, and both men tumbled in a heap at the foot of the stairway.

"Wiped out!" said a harsh voice. "They might 'a' knowed we wouldn't stand no sich racket as that. Now, git the gal out o' hyer! If she don't quit her squealin', rap her on the head! I've stood all the monkeyin' I'm a-goin' to!"

to. She brought them fellers down hyer with her yawpin', an' two o' my best men air knocked out o' time! But we downed them fer it!"

He strode toward Gladys's room. The young woman was only partially dressed, and two brutal ruffians were holding her, while she panted and screamed hysterically.

"Might's well dry up that singin', my sweet canary!" he exclaimed, as he planted himself in the doorway. "We've had enough o' it. You've got two o' your men downed by it a'ready, an' we'll down as many as you fetch, ef it's a hunterd."

"Now, I'll give you jist five minutes to sling on your clo'es. I'll take my men out o' the room, but every winder and door will be guarded with six-shooters. So there'll be no use fer you to try to git away, fer you can't. If you're dressed as you want to be at the end of the five minutes, all right. If you ain't, you'll have to go with us jist as you air. We ain't a-keerin' much, an' you kin take your choice."

"But, I'll say this, and mebbe it'll sort o' soothe yer feelin's! We don't intend to harm ye in any way. I'll down the fust man that lifts his little finger ag'in' you. But you've got to go with us, whether you want to er not!"

"Oh, father, father, if you were only here!" Gladys moaned, pressing her hands to her aching brows.

"But he ain't, my jewlark. He's off in the foot-hills chasin' Utes!"

He laughed in a harsh, disagreeable way.

"That was a ruther cute 'un we put up on yer daddy, an' I must say we played it fine. Lord bless you, my dear, thar ain't been a giniwine Ute in this vicinity fer a month, that I knows on, except what belongs to our little squad o' night-hawks. Thar was some Injuns in the gang that done the rustlin'—all the Injuns in fact we've got, but the rest on 'em was white men. An' they wasn't after cattle. No, my tulip, they was after you!"

"We didn't want to git our gang cut all to pieces by yer daddy's cowboys; so we put up a little game on him to draw 'em away. An' I must say that it worked ban'some!"

He seemed to take a malicious sort of satisfaction in thus revealing to Gladys the real helplessness of her condition.

"But I can't chatter all night, much as I like to talk to ladies. So, if you want to slip into more becomin' garments I'll call off my men. An' while you're at it, I'd 'vise you to put on a heavy jacket, fer ther night's cool!"

He grinned again, made a motion to his men and withdrew. His ruffians trailed after him into the hall and the door swung on its hinges.

Thus left alone Gladys sunk coweringly upon the bed and placed her hands over her eyes, as if to shut out from her mental sight the horrible visions that crowded upon it. She realized, however, that she could not thus give way. The moments were slipping by. She got up, dressed herself in a comfortable manner, concealed a little revolver in the pocket of her dress, and awaited with what calmness she could command, the summons of the leader of this desperate band.

She had heard the shots and wondered if the cowboy and the wounded man had been slain. The sudden cessation of the fight could point to no other conclusion. As she attempted a survey of the situation, she also became convinced that the other cowboys were likewise dead. Then she tried to unravel the mystery surrounding this carefully and cunningly planned attack; but no reasonable clew offered.

The five minutes became ten, then the leader of the band rapped upon the door and asked if she was ready. Evasion was useless. The door swung open, at her reply, and the man stalked into the room.

"Now, miss," he said, trying to tone down the natural harshness of his voice, "if you'll go along quiet, we'll not tie you. But if you make any break or tempt any kind o' foolishness, we'll strap ye up like a wild colt!"

There could be no mistaking his meaning, and Gladys signified her acceptance of the conditions. A little later she rode tremblingly away, surrounded by that band of fierce and reckless men.

"Gone at last! Now, if you'll roll over this way, pardner, I b'leeve I kin wriggle out o' this thing. I've got it 'most loose a'ready!"

The voice came from one of the cowboys in the stable.

The one who had gone to sleep, sitting bolt upright in the stable door, had been aroused, when the raid was made, by a light tap on the shoulder. He awoke to find himself looking into the tube of a revolver. His comrade had been similarly awakened.

They had sense enough to see that they were surrounded by armed men, and that resistance was worse than useless. So they submitted quietly, and were bound and left in the stable.

"I was a blamed fool to go to sleep like I did, but that can't be helped now. Ef we kin twist out o' these ropes mebbe we kin do somethin' toward offsettin' that piece o' keerlessness. Gladys gone, and I suppose Jim an' Tom's dead. There was yellin' an' shootin', and now ever'thing's sp'iciously quiet."

"Therel Now can't you set your teeth in

that thing? Ef you kin draw it jist a little, I b'leeve I kin git one o' my ban's out!"

The other cowboy wriggled into position, and began to work at the rope with his teeth like a gnawing rat.

"Tied fer keeps!" he panted, as he stopped to regain his breath. "I think I'm a-loosenin' it, though. The ole man'll be hot when he hears o' this! It's my 'pinion that we've all been fooled, an' that that wasn't a Ute raid at all. Jist a blind to put us to nappin' and draw the boys away."

He began to tug again at the rope. It gave slightly after a time, and then another series of pulls loosened it so that one hand could be slipped out of the nooses.

The rest was the work of only a few minutes. When they had stretched their arms and straightened their cramped limbs, they proceeded cautiously toward the ranch-house. The raiders had disarmed them; and although all was quiet and still, they could not tell what kind of a reception they might meet.

The doors had been left wide open. Two raiders lay dead in the hall, their weapons gone. At the foot of the stairway were Congdon and the cowboy who had been left to watch him. The cowboy was dead, but Congdon was breathing faintly.

They lifted him carefully and bore him to the bed from which he had so insanely leaped. Then they examined the nature of his injuries. To their surprise they found that, with the exception of the wound received at the hands of the rustlers, he was in nowise hurt. But, he was unconscious, and a considerable hemorrhage had taken place.

When the raiders fired that volley up the stairway, one of the balls struck the cowboy fairly in the forehead, killing him instantly. Congdon was not touched. But the falling man, as he lurched downward, struck Congdon with such force that he was knocked from his feet. Both went down in a heap, and the shock deprived Congdon of all sensibility. He lay like a dead man, and was so regarded by the raiders. Even when they took away his weapon they did not learn any better.

It was difficult to know what course to pursue, and the cowboys puzzled long over it, as they bent above Congdon's unconscious form.

They rebanded his wound, and endeavored to make him as comfortable as possible.

"One'll have to stay hyer an' t'other take the ole man word!" said one, with a positive air. "There's our ponies in the corral. The feller that goes kin take both o' 'em and so have a change. He'll have to do some tall ridin'. The ole man mus' know 'bout this as soon after daylight as possible, ef it kills the critters."

"But we ain't no weepins!" the other protested.

"We'll be as safe without weepins a-go'in' as stayin', I reckon. Ef you'd rather stay, I'll go. An' I'll put them hosses through! You kin look after Congdon; an' bury poor Tom an' them wuthless cusses down in the hall."

The arrangement was satisfactory, and they proceeded at once to carry it into effect.

The ponies were got out of the big corral, and long before daylight the cowboy was speeding away after Garland.

CHAPTER XXI.

MONCKTON IS MYSTIFIED.

To return to Colonel Miles Monckton. To say that he was mystified by Paul's continued absence from home puts it feebly.

In the first place he could not understand why Paul should visit the ranch in disguise; and the fact that he did not return naturally led to the inference that the men who had captured Huckleberry had been led into a mistake of identity.

The evidence was against them, but they stuck to their theory with great pertinacity.

Monckton passed that first day and the next in restless fuming. He dispatched men to various points to look up the young man claiming to be Las Animas Luke, and bring him to the ranch, using force if necessary. But the men missed Luke's trail, and the effort resulted in nothing.

The second night strange fires were noticed far away toward the foot-hills. Their discovery created great excitement. Some believed them to be burning buildings, and others thought the lights emanated from prairie fires. In either case the matter called for investigation, and Monckton sent out a squad of his cowboys for that purpose.

Monckton had almost fretted himself into a sick-bed, but he nevertheless insisted on remaining up until a late hour.

The cowboys crept off to their bunks and the ranch buildings grew so quiet that the sound of the ponies munching their hay in the stables and the deep breathing of a herd of cattle on the plains near by came to his ears quite distinctly.

The minutes slipped by unnoticed as he sat there on the little veranda, the faint starlight scarcely revealing his surroundings, pondering deeply over the events of the past few days.

Finally he was aroused by the sounds of stealthy footsteps. They came from the opposite side of the building. None of the cowboys were

likely to be stirring, and they would not be apt to creep about in that cat-like way if they were.

Monckton drew and cocked a revolver and walked cautiously around the corner of the house. He continued on until the opposite side of the building was clearly visible—as visible as it could be in the semi-darkness.

What he saw was the form of a man creeping quietly toward the door. Monckton knew by instinct that the fellow was not one of his employees, so he quickly pitched his revolver forward and sung out:

"Halt!"

Instead of obeying the command, the man bounded nimbly forward, his hand shot out, there was the gleam of a knife, followed by a "thud" as it struck the door. Then he dived around the corner of the house and disappeared.

Monckton fired at the flying figure and started in hot pursuit. The man ran nimbly across the open space, dodging to prevent an effective shot, and Monckton, as soon as he caught sight of him again, followed pantingly.

The cowboys, aroused by the firing, came tumbling out of their bunks. Some raced away after Monckton, and others hurried for their ponies. Not knowing exactly what was up, and thinking a fight might be impending, they preferred being mounted.

"Here he goes!" yelled Monckton, firing as he ran. "Catch him, some of you!"

The cowboys quickly passed their panting chief, and bounded away after the fugitive. But, the latter had now gained his horse. He cut the picket-rope, vaulted into the saddle, and dashed away with a defiant yell.

That yell guided the mounted cowboys, and they thundered hotly after. The others stopped and turned back to Monckton, who had sunk upon the grass, puffing and wholly exhausted.

"The scoundrel!" Monckton sputtered. "To come prowling around in that way. It wouldn't surprise me to learn that he's a fire-bug. He may be the very fellow that started those fires this evening!"

He ended with a fit of coughing, and fanned himself violently with his handkerchief.

"I hope the boys will take him. If they do, he'll answer mighty straight, or we'll string him up!"

Then he remembered the flashing knife and its heavy thud against the door.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, taking one of the cowboys by the arm and dragging himself to his feet. "Perhaps that will prove the key to the mystery."

The cowboys stared.

"The fellow hurled a knife at the door!" Monckton explained. "Now, why did he hurl it at the door? Why didn't he throw it at me? That would have been more natural. We must look into that, for it's a point worth examining."

He had not recovered from the effects of his violent run, and leaned heavily on the cowboy, as they retraced their way to the house.

The heavy knife was found sticking in the door. Attached to it was a folded paper, through which the blade had been passed. Monckton fairly quivered with excitement as he made this discovery.

"Run into my room and strike a light!" he exclaimed, as his hand closed about the paper. This is something of importance, I verily believe."

One of the cowboys hastened to obey the order, and the others assisted their panting employer into the house.

When the lamp was placed on the little stand before him, Monckton carefully smoothed out the crumpled sheet.

"It's from Paul!" he cried, as soon as his eyes fell on the handwriting.

Then he quickly ran over the communication, which was as follows:

"IN THE MOUNTAINS."

"DEAR FATHER:—It gives me great pleasure to find that I may be able to send you this letter, for I know how great your suspense must be. In the first place I must beg your pardon for the little escapade which led to my capture. Doubtless you know all about it before this, and I will not attempt a recital of the story. I refer to my elopement with Gladys. Gladys and I were taken by a band of masked men, and they now hold me here. Gladys was released, as I understand, which puzzled me greatly at first. The reason is quite clear now; my captors are in the pay of John Garland!"

"Why I am still held is unknown to me. I can only surmise. I believe it is to keep me from again meeting Gladys. No doubt Garland fears that if I am allowed to return home another elopement will be attempted. I can assure you, however, dear father, that I have no such thoughts. If I could get to see Garland I would tell him so. Of course I still love Gladys and hope some day to make her my wife—if I ever escape from here. But I am now willing to await your consent."

"If I could tell you just where I am you might be able to effect my rescue. But this I cannot do for I don't know. I was brought here in the night and have been carefully guarded ever since."

"I have bribed one of the men to carry you this letter. If he delivers it into your hands you may be able to learn something of my location. He will tell me nothing. I have nothing more to give him, for he now has all my money and my watch. A little cash from you might open his mouth."

"Your loving and not wayward son,

"PAUL."

"The scoundrel!" thundered Monckton, folding the closely-written paper and placing it carefully in an inner pocket.

This explosion was not directed at Paul, but at Garland.

"I knew he was at the bottom of the affair. I have been convinced of it from the very first. And I'll make him pay dear for this interference. Holding my boy caged in the mountains as if he was a wild animal that dare not be allowed to run at large!"

Monckton purpled apoplectically and smote the table with his clenched fist.

"I'll have his life for it. That I will. John Garland's a coward, or he would have met me in an open fight when I challenged him. But his sneaking and slanderous refusal will not avail him anything when I meet him!"

He choked and coughed and stared pantingly about.

"An' so the boys was mistaken after all about that air chap bein' Paul!" said one of the cowboys in the rift of the storm.

"No doubt of it at all, now!" cried Monckton. "I couldn't hardly believe Paul would act that way. I have no idea who this young fellow can be. The resemblance must be more than ordinary. If I come across him I'll make him tell me his real name and history or know why."

He got up from the chair and stumped nervously and aimlessly about the room.

"We must start for the mountains in the morning," he decided, stopping abruptly. "I'll find Paul, if I have to rake them over with a fine-tooth comb. I am going down to Garland's, just as soon as it's light enough to see. I intend to call him out, tell him the contents of that letter; and if he don't tell me where Paul is, promptly, I'll shoot him down like I would a coyote!"

He again started on his angry tramp; and his eyes glared so wildly that the waiting men feared to interrupt him or attempt any suggestions.

The sound of hoof-strokes diverted his thoughts, and he turned toward the doorway. The cowboys were returning unsuccessful from the chase.

When they had reported their inability to catch the man, Monckton explained the contents of the letter, and ordered them to get in readiness for an early start in the morning.

The bustle caused by executing this order had hardly subsided, when one of the men sent out to examine into the cause of the fires, returned with a report of the Ute raid.

Taken altogether it was a night of surprises and excitement; and little sleep was obtained by any one at the Monckton Ranch.

Then in the early hours of the morning another cowboy returned with a report of the capture of Gladys Garland, and a statement that Garland's forces were then on their way to the hills on a wild-goose chase after the supposed Utes. The messenger had passed Garland's men in the darkness. He had also circled in toward the Garland Ranch on his return, and by chance encountered the courier from the ranch-house. From him he learned of the surprise, fight and capture of Gladys.

"Into your saddles!" roared Monckton. "Things are getting twisted wonderfully, and we must be in at the mixing!"

CHAPTER XXII.

AS A CAGED BIRD.

It was truly with a sinking heart that Gladys Garland rode away from the familiar surroundings of her home, guarded by those wild and lawless night-riders. But she was a young woman of rare firmness and courage. The possession of the little weapon gave her a certain sense of security; and she fully resolved to use it in case of insult. Nevertheless, it was a situation to try the nerves of the most heroic of the sex, and Gladys was after all only a woman, with a woman's natural weakness and timidity.

The ride was a silent one. The raiders spoke only in guarded tones, having no wish, evidently, to attract the attention of any prowling cowboy. The horses swept onward through the darkness, their hoofs making little noise on the grassy carpet.

They were driven at a killing pace until the gullies marking the boundaries of the broken country were reached. Day was now at hand; and the outlaw leader led his men in a slower and more roundabout way through these gullies.

By the time the sun was up the broken country gave them concealment. But they hurried on without halt until they had gained the shelter of the foot-hills.

Here they halted for rest and a hasty meal. Then they pushed on again until mid-afternoon.

The fatiguing ride told sorely on Gladys's strength; and when this second halt was made she was almost ready to drop from the saddle through sheer exhaustion.

At this point they were joined by the men who, in the guise of Utes, had driven off the stock and fired the building. Half of them, perhaps, were Indians. These still wore their paint and feathers; but the others had made some attempts at removing the fantastic daubs of ochre and vermilion. The ablutions had not

been very thorough and patches of clayey paint remained, giving them a hideous and grotesque appearance.

With this party was the chief of the mountain prowlers, Ishmael Wolf. He was in great glee over the success which had been achieved. His beady eyes twinkled in the cavernous depths beneath the cliff-like brows, his long nose became more beak-like, and his yellow fangs more fiercely repulsive as he roared out his joy in great bursts of laughter.

"So, this hyer's the medder-lark that we've been to so much trouble to capter, eh?" he cried, striding toward Gladys. "Well, bu'st me, but she's ban'some! Beg pardon, miss, fer bein' so rough. It comes nateral I s'pose to men that eats bull meat and breathes snow-sculd half their time."

Gladys had shrunk from him and he stopped, in an apologetic way, again showing his fangs in an attempted smile.

"You needn't be atall afeared o' me, miss; likewise neither o' my men hyer. We're rough, but we're men, when it comes to the female sect; and they ain't one o' us would lift a finger to harm ye. Ef he did"—glaring savagely about—"t'wouldn't be healthy fer him in these parts when't got to the ears o' Ishmul."

"We do hold up up passengers what's got more gold than they kin well kerry, and we sometimes run off hosses, an' stock, merely in a business way, ye know. An' I do mind that we shot a coyote what come prowlin' round our den onc't. But, we didn't rustle yer daddy's cattle fer keeps, and we don't intend to hurt you. He'll find his split-toed critters scattered round in the hills, an' he'll prob'ly git you back, safe an' sound as a buzzard dollar, when a certain little money transaction in which I'm interested is fixed to soot. Meantime, you'll be as well treated as we know how."

"So don't think about us like we was dogs, miss! We ain't. Our hearts may be a little harder then the common run, and the hide on our backs a little thicker through, prob'ly, but we're men, arter all, ef we do call ourselves the Wolves o' the Mountains!"

The speech was evidently intended to be conciliatory, and Gladys believed it best to accept it in the spirit in which it was given. So she thanked him for his kindness, assured him that she had little fear of his men, and made a special point of the fact that she looked to him for protection.

Her ready tact received its reward in a pleased and expansive grin.

"Ef they says a word out'n the way to you, miss, let me know!" he repeated, sweeping the circle of outlaws with fiery eyes and dropping a hand significantly to one of his revolvers.

Then he turned away; and a little later began to shout gruff orders to the outlaws.

The ponies were brought in, the camp-fire kicked to pieces, and the wearisome journey was recommenced.

There were about twenty outlaws in the united band, probably the entire number that marshaled themselves under the suggestive name of Mountain Wolves. It could be seen at a glance that Ishmael ruled them with an iron hand. His slightest order was instantly and unquestioningly obeyed. He had found it the only way in which he could hold them in subjection, for they were a mutinous and murderous lot.

Just before dark another halt was made. The mountains were now looming grandly before them. Here the party divided, every horseman choosing a separate route. Ishmael accompanied Gladys, evidently fearing to trust her with any of his men.

She secretly feared him, but feared him less than she did his subordinates. However, there was no help for it, and she rode along at his side with apparent willingness. How she again congratulated herself, now, on having that tiny revolver! She knew it would not be safe to use it in the hope of effecting her escape. But if driven to an extremity she intended to shoot, and endeavor to make every shot tell.

Noticing her weariness, Ishmael halted frequently to allow her to recruit her strength. The way was rugged and seemingly interminable. The stars came out. Exhaustion, excitement and loss of sleep weighed her down. Occasionally she caught herself nodding, and awoke with a frightened start, as the pony stumbled.

They seemed to be ascending. Up, up, until it appeared they must certainly reach the clouds. Still the ponies held steadily on their way, with an occasional halt.

Ishmael was garrulous at first, but as the hours went by, he became silent, riding at her side like some gaunt and angular shadow. Midnight came and still they pressed on.

Gladys's overwrought nerves and weakened body could stand no more. She reeled, pitched forward and would have fallen from the saddle, if Ishmael's strong arm had not caught her.

When she returned to consciousness the sun was high in the heavens, birds were trilling merrily and the scent of wild roses floated to her on the breeze.

She was lying in bed, in a room of a stout log cabin. The room was rather scantily furnished,

but it was neat and orderly in appearance. A little washstand, made out of cracker-box, stood in one corner. The wash-stand was supplied with an earthen bowl and pitcher, and above them swung a cracked mirror.

Gladys arose with an air of curiosity—not unmixed with weariness, however, for she painfully felt the effects of her long and toilsome ride—and proceeded to make her simple toilet.

There was one high window in the room, and from it she could get a glimpse of other log houses and a range of encircling hills.

The sound of her footsteps, as she moved about the room, drew a lag-like woman to the door communicating with the other apartments.

"Up earlier'n I expected to see ye, my dear!" she said, in a high, cracked voice.

Gladys could not resist a feeling of repulsion at the thought that a woman should be found living voluntarily in this den of thieves.

"Where am I?" she demanded, somewhat coldly, in answer to this greeting.

"Ho! ho! miss! Don't take on any airs!" the old woman replied, rather fiercely. "T'wou'd do you no good. You're in the den o' the Mountain Wolves! Not as ban'some a place, I 'low, as yer own home, but ye mus' reekleek' it takes hard work, an' a heap of it, to git purty trinkets and peanners an' sich up hyer."

"Capt'in Ishmul says I'm to treat ye well, and I will ef you don't rile me."

Gladys saw that she had begun wrong. It would never do to make an enemy of this woman, however much she might detest her.

"Forgive me, aunty!" she said, extending her hand. "I spoke too hastily. But I am sq worn out!"

"I knowed ye'd be!" said the woman, showing her toothless gums. "'Tis a long ja'nt. Ishmul knowed yer daddy'd foller and he had to crowd things."

"Do you know why I'm held here?" Gladys questioned.

"Ef I knowed I dar'n't tell ye, honey. Capt'in Ishmul is a master hand to keep his own secrets. I'm to 'tend on ye an' answer no questions. That's orders. I s'pose, too, you'd rather be eatin' than talkin', so I'll bring ye yer breakfast. Shouldn't be s'prised if you hev rather a healthy up'tite after that ride!"

She left the room, closing the door softly, and soon returned with a steaming breakfast.

"I am half-famished, aunty!" Gladys exclaimed, as she saw the tempting dishes, simple but ample.

Then, as she ate, she attempted to draw some information from the old woman, in a quiet, conversational way.

"Law, honey, you're just like my son Sam, which is under Capt'in Ishmul. Sam's the slyest creeter, an' so still like as he gits' aroun' that they call him Slippery. An' he's a allus askin' the curiousest questions that a body'd never think of."

The attempt was a dismal failure. Like Captain Ishmael, the old lady was a "master hand" at keeping secrets.

When she had departed, Gladys endeavored to take a calm survey of her situation. But she found her mind in such a tumult she could not think clearly. She got up and paced restlessly about the room, looking anxiously through the little window toward the seamed ridges. One thought recurred again and again, with an ever-increasing force. Finally it found expression in words:

"Oh, that I were a bird, that I might fly away from this horrible place!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE TRAIL TORNADO.

"HYER you go ag'in, pardner, thumpin' away jes' like a thrashin' machine! I'm thrashed clean, I am! Got the bull knocked plum off o' me, same's a grain o' wheat! Hanged if the rest of me don't go purty soon!"

Huckleberry drawled out the words in a complaining voice, and drew his face awry.

Las Animas Luke smiled and continued to spur on his horse, keeping his eyes fixed closely on the trampled grass.

They were in the foot-hills; and speeding along a new, but well-defined trail.

The previous night they had camped at a water-hole in a gully on the border of the great plains. They had been making an exhaustive search of the surrounding country; and turned in at a very early hour, being worn out with hard riding and lack of rest.

Huckleberry awoke shortly before daylight. He got up, yawned, rubbed his eyes and walked toward the feeding horses. Suddenly he stopped, as if transfixed. The sky was brightly illuminated at several places to the northward, and out on the plains appeared a point of red light, like a burning star.

"Roarin' rockets!" he exclaimed, staring in open-mouthed astonishment. "If this was Chris'musser the Fourth I'd think them was bonfires. I don't reckon this section has got up a new hollyday!"

He shouted to Luke, and the latter scrambled quickly out of his blanket.

"What do you make of 'em?" asked Huckleberry, pointing toward the lights. "Seems to me rather curious fer the time o' year!"

"Raiders!" was Luke's instant response. "Either rustlers or Indians. More probably the latter. We'll have to look into it, Jonas. The red devils haven't much mercy, and some one may be badly in need of help at this moment."

The breakfast that followed was a hasty one, and before it was fairly light they were on their way toward the burning shanties.

They visited a line-camp and the cabins of several hunters. The fires at these places had burned down. There were no signs of a struggle anywhere, and they were forced to the conclusion that the houses had contained no occupants at the time of the raid.

The sun came up and climbed rapidly toward the zenith; and as there were several other points to be visited, they separated in order to cover the territory more quickly.

Within the field assigned to Huckleberry was the cabin of Gabe Taylor. When the little man reached it, his astonishment was almost too great for utterance. There, on a charred log which he had pulled from the ashes, sat the youth Huckleberry had met the previous day. His face was buried in his hands, and he was the picture of mute despair.

"Hey!" shouted Jonas. "You look like the statyure o' sorer a-settin' on a monument. What did yer git burnt up? Yer gold cuff-buttons?"

"Pap." Zeke replied, the tears trickling through his fingers.

"Sho!" Huckleberry reined in his horse so quickly that it was fairly thrown upon its haunches.

"Now you're a-jokin' me. He wouldn't jes' set in the house an' let the fire cook 'im!"

This drew from Zeke his theory of the case, and also the statement that Garland had passed that way, some time before.

"Well, young man, in my 'pinion, you're away off. I've visited several hunters' cabins this mornin' what had been burnt, and thar wa'n't any sign that the owners was to home when the Injuns sent in their cards. I'm thinkin' it's the same way hyer."

Zeke was commencing to combat this assertion, when he was interrupted by the clatter of hoofs, and a man came into view riding furiously.

It was the courier from the Garland Ranch, hastening to his employer with that terrible tale of abduction and disaster. He was riding one pony and leading another, and both were dripping with sweat and flecked with foam.

On reaching the burning shanty he leaped down and quickly transferred his saddle to the back of the led pony.

Huckleberry plied him with questions as he did so, and was soon in possession of all the facts in the case.

"Phew!" Huckleberry blew out his astonishment in a prolonged whistle.

"An' so the hull thing was jes' a scheme worked to git holt o' the gal easy! That lays me out, that does, flatter'n a pancake!"

The courier dashed away and Jonas again turned to Zeke, who seemed to take but little interest in the story, even if he heard or comprehended it.

"Better come along o' me, Zekell! You can't 'complish nothin' by sprinklin' tears over them ashes. Yer daddy's livin' an' I'll bet a boss on it! I've got to mosey, now, fer this piece o' news won't bear keepin'!"

But, Zeke was obdurate, and refused to leave the spot.

"Luck to you, then, with a wish that you'll come to your senses soon! I'd like to stay and argy the pint, but I can't. Not this trip."

And Huckleberry rode off toward the place where he expected to meet Luke.

When he arrived Luke was awaiting him, and was soon in possession of the story of the raid, in all its details.

He seemed completely staggered by it.

"What is your opinion?" he asked.

"Of who done it?"

"Yes."

"Well, now, the best shot is apt to miss, when he tries long range. Hows'ever, I think it's our man!"

"Just my opinion! And we'll find him by taking the trail of these raiders. They struck the hills north of here somewhere, the cowboy thinks. He must be right, or we would have crossed it in our ramblings this morning."

"It is doubtful if Garland can be overtaken and placed on the right trail for some hours. If he had treated us right I would aim to intersect and join his party. But I can't do it now. We would be again insulted; and one such insult is enough!"

"K'rect! I ain't no hawg!" Huckleberry growled, at the remembrance.

"But we must remember that we're even, Huckleberry! There is a woman in peril of the worst sort, probably. No matter if she is his daughter. It's our duty to attempt her rescue. I would insist that we should do so even if we had to abandon the business in hand. Fortunately, the two interests lay in the same direction."

"If we can rescue that girl and present her to

her father, it will take his high-mightiness down a peg, and be quite a feather in our caps."

"Don't keer 'bout feathers an' sich!" Jonas replied, smilingly. He was amused at the impatience and earnestness of the young man. "That is, in my cap. Now, ef I could feather my nest!"

"Which you can!"

"Yes! There's a sackful o' gold at the end of the rainbow, an' the new moon's got silver horns. But you ner I can't git holt o' 'em an' melt 'em down into ingots!"

"But we can find our man, Huckleberry, at the end of the trail, and that will be dollars in your pockets, or else you've been fibbing!"

"Go ahead!" said Huckleberry, pursing his lips in a smile. "I'll foller! I ain't a Job's comforter yit, I hope. The on'y trouble with me is, I reckon, I'm feelin' the sorerful touch o' comin' age. The apples at the roadside wouldn't be quite so temptin', I s'pose, as when I was a boy, an' other things must be figgered in proportion. So, if I don't drap into all your leetle plans with blood a-bilin', I hope you won't lay it up ag'in' me. It's natur', an' it won't do to rub too hard ag'in' natur' er you'll peef the skin off."

Luke scarcely waited to hear the end of this philosophical disquisition. He was impatient to be off.

Huckleberry bobbed along after him at his best gait, grumbling occasionally at the speed, and exerting himself to keep within speaking distance. Occasionally he fell into a fit of musing that twisted his withered face into a lath-work of perplexed wrinkles.

"Hot blood goes a good ways in a young man!" he muttered. "But that air chap b'iles along jes' like he was wild. I'll hev to watch him!"

And watch him he did, hour after hour, in a furtive and questioning way.

When they found the trail made by the abductors the afternoon was nearly spent. Luke had been pushing on at the top of his speed, and their ponies showed signs of utter exhaustion; so they camped on the trail and prepared for a short period of rest.

"Shadders o' doubt!" muttered Huckleberry, as he reclined in the shade of a rock and watched Luke's impatient movements as he looked after the horses. "The air's a-gittin' so thick with s'picious circumstances that you can almost cut it with a bread-knife. Luke's allers in fer rearin' an' chargin' right ahead when he's a-trailin', but he's a reglar tornader this afternoon. He can't give them poor beasts a chance to eat."

"I never was good at 'rithmetic, but I can put two an' two together an' make four. But s'picious ain't clear like figgers, though you can make 'em lie jes' like you can figgers. An' you'll do it, Jonas, if you ain't pesky keerful!"

"Now my s'picious keeps tellin' me that ole man Garland were jes' right when he sized up this young feller. There's somethin' powerful queer 'bout it. Yes! Now, if he ain't Paul Monckton why sh'd he b'ile ahead after this gal like a racin' steamboat with a nigger settin' on the safety-valve? Jonas, there's yer problem. Git out yer algebray an' see if you can figger it up!"

He settled himself comfortably and for a full half-hour continued to watch through half-closed lids.

Then Luke aroused him from his speculations by singing out:

"It's an hour yet until sundown, Huckleberry! Let's be moving. We can cover a good deal of ground by that time."

Huckleberry lazily obeyed; and they were soon plunging along the trail at a pace that drew from the little man the growling remonstrance with which this chapter opened.

CHAPTER XXIV.

JONAS AS A PEACEMAKER.

"If I didn't know better I'd jes' natcher'ly think there was gold dollars a-growin' under ev'ry rock in these hills, the way folks goes slashin' about over 'em!"

Huckleberry was in no very amiable frame of mind. It was the morning of the next day; and he was alone.

They had gone into camp about dark the previous evening, against Luke's protests. Huckleberry had declared that he was worn out, that the horses needed rest, and refused positively to go any further.

For security they had struck off into the hills, away from the trail, before camping.

Before daylight Luke aroused Huckleberry and insisted on proceeding. At this Huckleberry became indignant.

"I've follered you at chain-lightning speed jes' as long as I'm goin' to!" he growled. "I ain't so young and soople; and hang it, Luke, I ain't in love!"

"What do you mean by that?" Luke demanded.

Then Huckleberry heaped upon the young man's head the algebraic equation into which he had worked his "figgers."

The words that followed were harsh enough to make each regret having uttered them; and Luke rode away, leaving Jonas to crystallize

his suspicions into whatever conclusion best pleased him.

The growling comment was evoked by the appearance of a body of horsemen. They seemed to be following no regular trail, but were spread out through the hills as if searching for one.

"And drat it, they're comin' this way!" Huckleberry climbed to the top of a rock to get a better view.

"Yes; they're comin' this way," he repeated, as he squatted on the apex of the rock. "An' I ain't a-feelin' jes' right fer comp'ny nuther!"

The horsemen came on in irregular order, and Jonas watched them closely.

When they caught sight of him they spurred into a brisk gallop.

"Hello, ole man!" saluted one who had ridden slightly in advance of the others. "Don't know me, I 'low!"

Huckleberry stared; then wrinkled his face in a smile.

The speaker was the cowboy who had tied him up in Monckton's stable and swung a whip so threateningly over his head.

"I'd 'a' knowed you sooner if you'd 'a' had a whip quiled up on yer saddle along o' that rope."

Huckleberry broke into a chuckling laugh as he remembered how the cowboy had weakened when Luke appeared.

The cowboy flushed slightly, and turned to the leader of the party, a heavy, red-faced man.

"Mr. Monckton, this air the chap that war with the feller I took to be Paul."

Monckton spurred forward, eagerly, doffing his hat.

"Eh! Glad to meet you, Mr.— Mr.—"

"Huckleberry!" responded the little man dryly, from his high perch. "An' which his fu'st name is Jonas."

"Yes; glad to meet you, Mr. Huckleberry. My name is Monckton, Colonel Miles Monckton, and these are my cowboys. We're looking for a young man named Paul Monckton. My son, in fact. I have been led to believe that you may know something about him."

Huckleberry was on his guard as soon as he knew the horsemen were Monckton's party. Notwithstanding his suspicions, he was not at all sure that Luke was Paul, and did not propose to say so until he had more light on the subject.

"Don't know that I hev ever met a young man by that name!" he averred, throwing out the remark as a feeler.

"Why, the young feller you wus with the day you come to the ranch," explained the cowboy.

"Well, his name ain't Paul Monckton! Leastwise, he don't call hisself that. He tol' me his handle was Las Animas Luke—reel name Luke Lockburn, an' I s'pose I'll hev to believe he knows what he's talkin' 'bout."

"Where is he?" asked Monckton.

"Well, cunnel, you can see he ain't hyer."

Monckton frowned.

"Come, come, my good fellow! Of course I can see he isn't herel!"

"An' I don't know jes' where he is at this very identical moment. Som'eres in the hills, though."

"What are you and he doing in the hills?" Monckton demanded. Huckleberry's coolness irritated him.

"Shadders o' wrath, cunnel! That's ruther p'inted, ain't it? We're a-lockin' fer a man!"

"And a woman?"

"And a woman! Yes! we're a-lockin' fer a female, too. If you should run acrost 'em I'd be obleeged if you'd drap their addresses into the nearest post-office, fer me."

Monckton saw that he was making no progress. He controlled his temper with an effort and struck out again.

"Can you tell me how many parties are now in the hills?"

"Altogether, cunnel? Foxes an' hounds an' all? Chasers an' them that's bein' chased?"

"Yes; all you know about them, please!"

Huckleberry smiled. That last word indicated a change in Monckton's bearing.

"Well, cunnel, I'll hev to figger! Le's see!"

He dropped his face into his hands; looking up again in a few moments.

"Cunnel, there's six! There's the shanty-burnin' Utes, an' their pardners that's run away with the gal. There's Las Animas Luke an' me—which we're two parties this mornin'. Then there's you, an' there's Garland."

He was watching Monckton narrowly and noticed the thunder-cloud that settled upon the latter's brow at the sound of that hated name.

"Jews and Philistines!" he muttered. "There'll be war if them two parties comes together."

"Do you know where Garland's party is?" Monckton persisted, suppressed anger showing in his face.

"I don't, cunnel; an' if I did I wouldn't tell ye! Now, don't go off half-cocked!" as Monckton began to fume and sputter. "Leastwise let me explain fu'st. You don't want to meet Garland's party!"

"Don't I?" cried Monckton. "That's all you know about it!"

"No, you don't! Not while you're in yer present temper. There'd be blood spilt that you'd live to be sorry fer. Garland's lost his

gal an' you've lost your son, an' you're both claimin' an' thinkin' that the other'n is at the bottom o' it. Now you're mistaken—both on you. I know that much, though, mebbe, I can't make you see it jes' as I do.

"There's devils' work goin' on in this country, Mr. Monckton. I've some idee 'bout the thing, but not enough to count. Anyhow I don't keer about puttin' it into the newspapers until I git furdur along the rope. But, I'll say this: There's some man or men workin' ag'in' both o' you ranchers—dead ag'in' you both.

"I know that you didn't kerry away Garland's darter, but, I don't know it a bit better than I know that Garland *didn't* kerry off your son. You see, cunnel, I've heered the whole story and I've been a figgerin'.

"Why, the thing's onreasonable, an' I'm surprised that two reel sensible men like I know you to be could be led into sich a mistake. Now, if Garland had reely kerryed away your son, do you suppose, cunnel, that jes' in order to deceive you into thinkin' he hadn't, he'd send a lot o' Utes an' painted whites to rustle his own cattle and kill his own men? And to still furdur keep up the deception do you 'low that he'd hev his ranch raided and his darter kerryed off in the night by a lot o' ruffyuns? Cool down, cunnel, an' figger on it a leetle!"

"Who then could be holding my son?"

The words had had little effect on the choleric ranchman.

"I must say that you reason well, but you are not in possession of all the facts and hence are not able to judge correctly. Now, what do you say to that? Read it!"

Monckton drew a letter from an inner pocket and waved it at the little man.

"That will knock your train of argument! Logic is good, friend Huckleberry, but facts are a heap better."

Jonas scrambled down from the rock, grasped the proffered letter and read it with an intense eagerness. The look of blank astonishment at came to his face, as he ended, is simply indescribable.

"Rather takes the cap sheaf off of your pile of eloquence and leaves it somewhat naked, don't it? Facts, friend Huckleberry, are worth all the fine theories that were ever invented."

Monckton could not keep from betraying a slight trace of exultation.

"If your son writ that, cunnel, then I give up!" Huckleberry returned, bumbly.

The question that pressed him down and which he dared not utter, was:

"Who, then, is Las Animas Luke?"

"Since receiving that letter, friend Huckleberry, I haven't had a shadow of doubt on the subject, whatever I may have thought before. Paul is a young man of rather keen perceptions and not easily led into an error; and when he states that his captors are in Garland's pay the statement can be relied on.

"Now, it is possible that Garland may not have instigated the Ute raid and the abduction of his own daughter. I can scarcely conceive of such baseness, though I assure you, Garland will stoop to anything. The raid and abduction may have been the scheme of a band of outlaws after ransom money. I am a little mixed as to that myself. But I am not mixed as to the other. And I say to you now, so that you may tell him if you chance to encounter him, I propose to shoot John Garland on sight."

Monckton was again working himself into a fury.

"But about this Las Animas Luke?" Huckleberry interposed for the purpose of changing the current of Monckton's thought.

"A case of mistaken identity. It can't be anything else. I am extremely anxious to see the young man. The resemblance must be rather remarkable to deceive my men so; but they were deceived. There can be no question about it. If you'll lead me to this young man, friend Huckleberry, the mystery can be quickly sifted. I will take it as a very great favor."

Huckleberry was as anxious for such a meeting as was Monckton and he pondered the subject quite awhile before replying. His curiosity urged him to lead the party after Luke, but his judgment told him not to.

He knew that it could not be long until Garland would be thundering over that trail with his band of cowboys. A deadly conflict would be the inevitable result.

In addition he saw that if that contest was to be averted he dare not reveal even the location of the trail. If Monckton's men stumbled upon it, he would not be responsible for the result. If he led them there his hands would be stained with the blood that must flow.

"Not knowin' jes' exactly where he is, I can't do it, cunnel! Would like to have the tangles tuck out o' the thing as much as you would. It may be possible that he's a-rampin' round in yender, som'eres"—pointing in a direction opposite to the true one—"though I don't say that I know it. That'll be as good a place to hunt as any, I calc'late, when the whole country's open!"

"As fer me, I'm a-goin' to camp right hyer—fer awhile at least. I've rid till I'm sore from my toe-nails to my ears!"

There was such an air of candor and sim-

plicity about the speaker that Monckton was completely deceived.

He thanked Huckleberry; and after some further words led his party in the direction indicated.

Huckleberry shinned up the rock and watched them until they were out of sight. Then he slipped down, bridled and saddled his horse and hurried away after Las Animas Luke.

CHAPTER XXV.

A SINGULAR AFFAIR.

"By all the racin' Romans o' history! If he keeps on like he's been goin' he'll kill hoss an' man both! He must be made out o' b'iler iron, fer I never yit see'd a man that could stand as much hard ridin'. An' he's jes' as heady! Won't listen to nothin', when onc't he gits started."

Huckleberry wrinkled his brow in thought as he spurred along the rocky, but fairly well defined trail.

"Got my algebray and 'rithmetic kind o' tangled into knots! Yisterday I was 'bout cert'in that Luke is Paul. To-day I don't know nothin'."

The trail grew rougher as he advanced. The foot-hills gradually attained to higher proportions, and a number of peaks reared themselves aloft, indicating the approach of the mountain barriers.

By this it is not meant that he was approaching the backbone of the American continent. It would take weeks to do that. But simply that he was gradually working toward one of the far outlying spurs of the great Rocky Mountain Range. In fact, the entire scene of this story only hovers about the base of the Rockies.

He pushed on for hours as rapidly as possible. Then the plain trail ended as suddenly as if a wall interposed.

Huckleberry was not an expert trailer, but his eyes were keen, and he had an abundance of that useful article—hard common sense.

He dismounted, tied the pony to a bush, and commenced a minute search of the ground.

"Them fellers' hosses didn't hev wings," he muttered, as he bent to the scrutiny, "and they didn't fly away from hyer. They jes' walked out. I've see'd pictur's of hosses with wings, but they were jes' pictur's, an' not the giniwine article."

He soon became convinced that the abductors had scattered.

"A reg'lar spider-web they hev made of it!" he cried, with a snort of disgust. "Now, how can they expect their frien's to find 'em. That's scaly, that is!"

"An' as fer Luke, I dunno if I can fergive him er not! He might hev stuck up a sign-board, anyhow."

Further search, however, revealed that Luke had not been altogether thoughtless. His handkerchief was found sticking to a tree in one of the ravines leading from the place.

Luke, when he came to this place of separation, had followed the trail of the two horses, rightly judging that Gladys would not be sent away alone. But it had taken him hours to determine the matter, for the trails in each direction were trampled by a number of horses. They had been ridden out and back for the purpose of confusing pursuers. Therefore, at this time, Huckleberry was really not far in Luke's rear.

"Ekal to a billydoo," said Huckleberry, exultantly, as his eyes fell upon the handkerchief. "A letter with forty postscripts couldn't say no more."

He was about to remove the handkerchief, when he remembered that Garland's party would probably be along after a while.

His first impulse was to ride back a distance and hang his own handkerchief on the bushes to indicate the route more plainly. It seemed to him that Luke had been rather remiss in that.

But further thought convinced him that that was not the best plan. The handkerchief was not for the eyes of foes, but searching friends. If the line of route was marked too conspicuously, it would attract the attention of any raider who might chance that way; and word of the pursuit would be spread quickly.

"Creepin' catymounts! Might's well put 't in the papers!" Huckleberry exclaimed, drawing back. "In this hyer kind o' bizness a feller wants to keep his wits about him. Hyer I've been blamin' the boy fer not blazin' the road plainer. I'd hev hung a rag on ev'ry bush, so long's my clo'es lasted, an' then pasted chunks of my ha'r to the rocks. That's all the sense I've got. Them chaps is relyin' on that puzzlin' cat's-cradle back there to throw everybody off the track. I'm free to say it would hev throwed me!"

He spurred on again, watching the ground narrowly to see that the faint trail left in the flinty soil did not leave the gully without his knowledge.

As he turned an angle, the report of a pistol came from up the ravine.

Huckleberry dug his spurs into the pony's flanks with a vehemence that fairly brought the blood.

"The boy's in trouble! Trapped, likely. B'il-in' along too fast to keep his eyes open."

That reckless gait soon placed the obscuring fringes of bushes behind him.

Las Animas Luke was on foot and engaged in a struggle with a large, powerful man. He had evidently dismounted with the intention of making an investigation of some mysterious circumstance, when the man had leaped out and attempted to overpower him. There could be little doubt that Luke had fired the shot, for his revolver lay upon the ground at his feet.

Worse than all, other men were scrambling out from behind bushes and boulders and rushing to the assistance of the giant who was so sorely pressing Luke.

It was more than Huckleberry could stand. With a terrible yell, he drew his revolver, urged on his horse, and commenced firing at the running figures. None of the shots taking effect, Huckleberry leaped from the saddle, whipped out a long knife, and rushed into the fray.

In his cooler moments he would scarcely have been guilty of so reckless a proceeding, but his blood was boiling, and he acted wholly upon impulse to serve and save his pard.

Luke was making a gallant fight. Once he freed himself from the bear-like hug of the giant and then laid him out flat, with a well-directed blow planted squarely between the eyes.

The man scrambled to his feet, with a howl, and drew a wicked-looking knife. With this he began to circle about Luke, making feints for the purpose of getting in a blow with perfect safety to himself.

"Drop that!" shouted one of the new-comers. "If you tech him with that, I'll curse ye!"

The giant obeyed with a snarl of rage, and aimed a heavy blow with his fist at Luke's head, as the other leaped at him from behind.

This was the situation when Huckleberry made his rush.

"Out of the way, there! Ki-yi! Screamin' painters! Take that, will you? Whoop!"

Huckleberry made a vicious lunge at the man who interposed between him and his comrade, but the strong man caught the knife-hand, and then closed with his little assailant.

The struggle that followed was a terrific one. Huckleberry, in spite of his years, was as lithe as a willow, and as strong as a young pine.

With a dextrous twist the fellow flung the knife from Huckleberry's grasp, as it was again on the point of descending. Then Huckleberry was stricken senseless by a blow from the rear.

Luke had been overpowered and bound, and was standing with his back against a rock, panting and helpless.

"Shall I split his weazen?" demanded one, leaning over Huckleberry, with a knife. "Dead men tell no tales!"

"No!" ordered the leader, in a harsh voice. He was crouching upon the ground, panting and puffing from his recent exertions.

"Good as dead, anyhow!" affirmed the other, coolly. "Might's well make a sure thing of it."

"Don't put a rope around your neck when you don't have to. Chuck him into the bushes!"

When Huckleberry came back to consciousness he was alone. The sun poured its burning rays down on his aching head. The ravine was silent!

He crawled feebly to his feet and staggered out of the bushes. A nibbling sound and a snapping of twigs drew his attention to a valley leading off from the ravine. Picking up a twisted stick to use for a cane, he bobbled out into this valley to determine the nature and cause of the sounds.

His horse was grazing contentedly amid the thick undergrowth. Perhaps the outlaws had forgotten it or cared not to take it with them. More probably they could not catch it, or it had disappeared during the progress of the fight.

Huckleberry uttered an exclamation of joy. He went up to the animal, secured it and with some difficulty mounted.

Then he rode back into the ravine, to discover that the trail was trampled almost into dust. Hoof-prints crowded and pressed upon one another.

"Pursuin' phalanxes!" he cried, his lips quivering with delight. "Garland's men went by hyer jes' a-howlin' while I was layin' there tryin' to stare the sun out o' the skies."

"There'll be roarin' times this day, an' I'm bound to see the thing through, if it splits my ole head plum open."

He stiffened himself in the saddle, wheeled the pony and clattered up the ravine at a rapid gait, heedless of his confused and aching head and weakened frame.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A REVELATION.

"SCATTER again, boys, and make a careful search. The fellows are as cunning as foxes!"

John Garland sat quietly in his saddle until he saw that the order was carried out understandingly, and then rode forward in the direction he had marked out for himself.

The sun was scarcely two hours high and they were quite near the den of the Mountain Wolves. Garland could see one of the semi-circular ridges that flanked the valley occupied by the outlaws; yet he never dreamed that they were so near.

He had seen the directing handkerchief, without knowing of course who placed it there, and had hurried on as rapidly as possible all the afternoon. His men had also made a hasty examination of the place where Luke was captured. It had never occurred to them to beat the bushes where Huckleberry lay senseless and bleeding.

And now they had come to another bewildering division in the trail.

Had Garland but known it, Jonas Huckleberry was then only a short distance in his rear. Five minutes' waiting—ay, two minutes' waiting after his men had disappeared, would have brought Huckleberry up to him. And the little man might have been of service!

But Garland did not know this and rode on alone, anxious and wearied.

For nearly a mile he followed the hoof-prints of a single horse. Then these vanished. The hoof-prints almost entirely disappeared at that point and the rock retained no impression. Bushes grew here and there in crevices, springing seemingly out of the very granite. Occasionally there were clusters of them sufficient to shut out the view to the front and the rear.

Garland pushed on over the rocks, hoping to again strike the trail. Then he came close up to the cliff-like barrier of the ridge, and for an hour rode up and down along it, searching every clayey spot for the imprints of a hoof.

The ridge rose above him in a sheer precipice, broken at intervals by table-like ledges which might be scaled. Intent upon the earth at his feet, he was paying no attention to these.

Suddenly a scream came from the nearest ledge.

Garland gave a startled cry, wheeled in his saddle and looked upward.

There, not more than a hundred feet away was Gladys, struggling in the arms of a strong man, who was trying to stifle her cries. Around him were a number of ruffians and in their midst sat Paul Monckton, bound, gagged, and helpless.

Garland uttered a vigorous anathema, as he leaped out of the saddle and drew his weapons. The swaying forms of the man and girl prevented him from using them, and he began blindly to scale the rocky slope.

Then a number of men leaped on him from the concealment of the bushes, his weapons were stricken from his hands and he was borne to the earth. He fought with all the desperate fierceness of a tiger, but it brought only an increase in the number of blows received. Courage and strength could avail little against the overpowering force of numbers.

"Kill me!" he cried, as they held him down and proceeded to tie his hands and feet. "You might as well do it as to torture me thus!"

"We don't want to kill you just yet, friend Garland!"

Garland started. The voice had a familiar ring.

He writhed to a sitting position and looked up into the hate-distorted face of Gabe Taylor!

Beyond, he could see Gladys and Paul and the outlaws about them. Gladys's cries had been stopped by the insertion of a handkerchief into her mouth.

Taylor had thrown aside the rude form of speech which for years he had used as a mask. Now he seated himself with cool deliberation on a convenient boulder, and looked at Garland with eyes that seemed to burn.

"Kind in you, friend Garland, to throw yourself into our hands in this way! Equals the pretty little story of our school-books about the cunning spider and the over-trustful fly!"

Garland's amazement and indignation were so great that he was absolutely speechless. He could not for the moment realize that this was the apparently simple-minded man he had so trusted and believed in.

"You—you hell-hound!" he at last managed to articulate. "What is the meaning of this? What kind of deception have you been practicing on me?"

"Take it easy, friend Garland! We'll get along better and come to an understanding sooner. Besides, time, like the Express-train, waits for no man! 'The shades of night are falling fast,' etc., or soon will be. You've heard the original observation!"

He took out a pipe, filled it and proceeded to strike a match, watching Garland's writhing features all the while with the coolness of a fiend.

"As a friend of both families, you know, Mr. Garland!" he continued, blowing a cloud of smoke from his nostrils. "If you and Monckton would engage to exhibit yourselves at the next State Fair as the champion fools of Colorado, I have no doubt you would take the blue ribbon!"

"Demon! Fiend!" shrieked Garland, panting with impotent rage. "If I ever regain my liberty I swear that I will kill you, if I have to hunt you to the ends of the earth!"

"Thanks for the proviso!"

Taylor inclined his head with mock gravity.

"But really, friend Garland, wouldn't it be safer to say that you will hunt me after death? And upon the whole more reasonable? I have been told by competent authorities that the earth, like a wedding-ring, has no ends! And, besides, you are about as near to liberty as you

will ever get. Facts are harsh things sometimes, but I am a disciple of Mr. Gradgrind and believe in dosing them out in large quantities.

"But, pardon me, please!" blowing another dense cloud of smoke from his nostrils. "I see that you don't remember me, which makes it necessary that I should tell a little story:

"Once upon a time, a good many years ago, 'there dwelt a miller, hale and bold, beside the river Dee! For miller read cattleman, and for Dee read Red River and you will have it about right. This cattleman had a neighbor who was engaged in the same business. In fact, their ranches lay side by side, and they were the warmest of friends. One had a son, the other a daughter—sweet, pretty things, children both at that time.

"For convenience, we will call one of these men Monckton and the other Garland. Garland had a brother, younger than himself, and this brother was foreman of his ranch. Monckton's foreman was a young married man, named Joseph Whitelaw.

"Ah, I see you start! Memory isn't quite dead, and even your calloused heart has still power to sting itself!"

He fixed his eyes upon the face of the bound man with a look of burning, withering hate.

Garland lifted himself and returned the gaze, doubt and curiosity struggling for the mastery.

"Whitelaw had a child, a boy, nearly the age of Garland's and Monckton's children. He loved that boy as he loved his own life, and he worshiped and trusted his beautiful wife as few men worship and trust women.

"His love made him blind—blind as the burrowing mole! He did not see—he did not dream that Garland's brother was stealing away the affections of his wife—that a wayward and wicked love had grown up in her heart for this human viper—that she had become as false as she was fair! And Garland's brother, by devilish wiles and deceitful looks, wrought this change, even while he met the wronged husband almost every day with a Judas smile upon his lips."

Garland was staring, as if his eyes would start from his head.

"You—you are not—?"

"But a revelation came," Taylor continued, without heeding the interruption, "and, with it, came a terrible explosion. Whitelaw had discovered the truth. He hurried into the house where young Garland was, and attacked him with a fury born of the insanity of hate and despair. In the struggle his boy—the pride of his life—was stricken down, dying as he believed. His wife hurried out into the wild night, never to be seen by him again. And Garland was sent to a torturing eternity, as I hope, by Whitelaw's avenging hand!"

He stopped, pale and panting.

"You, then, are Joseph Whitelaw!" Garland cried, straining at his bonds.

"Yes; Joseph Whitelaw! The world seemed seemed very fair to me, twenty years ago, John Garland—fair as a summer morning! Twenty years ago Joseph Whitelaw had all the world before him and success at his feet. Finely educated, happily married and prosperous, he looked forward to the day—which seemed fast approaching—when he would be master of herds and flocks and, like Crusoe on his little island, monarch of all he surveyed.

"For twenty years a smoldering hell has burned in my heart, and my happiness has consisted in prodding away at the fires.

"The son in whom I delighted recovered from the blow, but for years he was little better than an imbecile. He has greatly improved of late, but is not a son that a father can take proud delight in. When I see what he is, and think of what he *might* have been, John Garland, it drives me mad!"

"You do not ask why I hate you in this connection!"

He bent forward, licking his lips like a famishing wolf.

"You know only too well, John Garland! When I had but done what any man would have done, slain the destroyer of my happiness, you joined with Monckton in an effort to punish me! You filled the land with the bloodhounds of the law; you poured out money like water; your reward-bills covered the country like the leaves of the forest; and when I was taken you spared neither time nor effort to secure my conviction and death.

"Yes, John Garland, my death, by the reptile-trailed path to the scaffold.

"Then there came a fire into my heart that blood and tears cannot quench. It has burned through twenty weary years, and it would burn through twenty crawling centuries should I live that long. It is the self-fed volcanic fire of hate! It is a spark from that fire that never dies!"

"Do you wonder, then, what has sustained me? The revenge to come has been my meat and drink! It has put muscle into my frame and fiber into my heart and patient endurance into my brain.

"When that resolve for revenge shaped itself, bolts and bars and prison walls could not hold me. I became a fugitive from the law, a wanderer, biding my time.

"Years crept by. I was in many lands and countries, but, through it all, I never forgot the debt I owed to the ranchmen of Red River.

"When I came back they had gone. I found my son, living with a miserable old hag, in filthy surroundings. I stole him from her, and began my search for you and for revenge.

"Finally I located you. You had settled down here, with Monckton, happy and contented, and caring nothing for the wrecked life of Joseph Whitelaw.

"I had changed in those years, and I settled down near you as a vagabond hunter and petty horse-trader. I disguised my speech by assuming the vernacular, and you never suspected that a deadly enemy lurked so near.

"I had learned patience, also, friend Garland—a patience to which the stoical endurance of an Indian is tame. I could have slain you and Monckton many times, but did not desire your death. My revenge took on a bolder form than that.

"I became a mutual friend; and, as the years slipped by, a thousand little differences and squabbles and disputes arose between you which were all of my secret planning. I set about the business so coolly and wily that the part taken by me was never suspected."

"You fiend!" shrieked Garland, panting and struggling.

"Instead of friends you became notorious far and near as 'the rival ranchmen.' I did what I could to foster the love that sprang up between your daughter and Monckton's son, knowing that scarcely anything could bring to both of you greater pain.

"When they eloped for the purpose of getting married, I had a band of men pursue them. I had been expecting it and was prepared. I carried them away, and now hold them, as you can see.

"And, Garland, dear friend of my youth, long as has been my story, I have only outlined it. I haven't told half. Nor have I told you of the tortures I hold in store, but this much I will say, as a first installment:—Look your last on your daughter! You will never see her again!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

A SAD MEETING.

"Oh, that I were a bird, that I might fly away from this horrible place!" Gladys repeated again and again in thought as she walked restlessly about her prison, after the retirement of the old crone with the breakfast remnants.

The hours of the day crept by on leaden feet.

The old woman repeated her visit at noon. Then Gladys was again left to her own sorrowful musings.

Toward evening heavy footsteps were heard in the adjoining room. The door swung open and Gabe Taylor stepped into Gladys's prison.

Gladys uttered a little cry of recognition, which contained a trace of hope and a very large quantity of doubt and fear. She had never regarded Taylor with a favoring eye.

"Oh, Mr. Taylor, have you come to release me?"

"If it seems the best thing to be done, Miss Gladys!" he replied, with a subservient bow. "Tany rate, this I'll say: I'm a-goin' to take you where you kin see yer pap. I've got some little power hyer, which I can't explain jest now how I got it."

"Where is father?" she asked, her eyes lighting.

"He's a-ridin' up and down jist acrost that crown o' ridge therel' pointing through the window toward the encircling hills. 'Diskivered him a little while ago. Seems like he's lookin' for somethin'."

"It must be for some trail that will lead him to me!" Gladys exclaimed, clasping her hands anxiously.

"So I thought. And if you'd like to go along o' me, we'll go out to a p'int where we kin speak to him!"

"And perhaps reach him?" questioningly.

"P'raps! dryly. "Can't say as to that. But I think it kin be 'ranged so's to put you within speakin' distance."

There was more trampling of heavy feet in the adjoining room.

"Come!" urged Taylor, grasping her by the hand. "We ain't got any time to lose. That's our escort."

He almost dragged her through the door, so great had his haste become.

As they emerged into the other room, Gladys uttered a sharp cry and took a step forward.

"Oh, Paul!"

"What's he doin' hyer without a gag in

his mouth?" Taylor thundered. "Gag him at one't before he talks too much."

Paul Monckton, pale, trembling, and surrounded by armed men, stood before Gladys.

As the brutal command was given, he pushed forward and extended his bound hands toward her.

"Did you get my letter, Gladys?" he asked, eagerly.

"Gag him!" roared Taylor. "What'd you bring him hyer that way for anyhow?"

Paul clinched his fists and raised his bound hands threateningly.

"Back!" he cried. "I will speak! Gladys, put no faith in anything Gabe Taylor may tell you. He is a conscienceless villain!"

Gladys gave a wild scream and sprung toward the struggling youth.

"Down him!" exclaimed Taylor, raising his hand to strike.

The blow was not given. A blanket was hung dextrously over the young man's head, and he was borne to the floor, fighting and scrambling.

"Now bring him along!" Taylor growled, when the gag had been applied. "We're losin' time."

Before they could leave the room a man rode hurriedly up to the door. It was Captain Ishmael.

"You'll hev to drop that air fer a minit," he bawled, "an' take a look at things down the canyon. There's a hull wheen o' fellers circlin' round that way. The sentinel's jest reported that he thinks they're Garland's men. We may hev to send some o' the boys out an' toll 'em off, 'fore they try to come up the crick!"

Taylor uttered an oath, leaped upon a horse and dashed away with the redoubtable captain.

One of the men shouted to the crone who had acted as Gladys's guard; and then they all thundered after their leaders.

Gladys glanced quickly about, and leaped to the little cupboard, hoping to find a knife.

She found one, but before she could use it, the hag entered the room.

"Drap that!" cried the old woman, shuffling forward.

Instead of obeying, Gladys hurried to where Paul was seated and began to saw at his bonds with the dull blade.

"Sam! Oh, Sam!" screamed the old woman, dancing about in a very fury.

The door from which she had just emerged was thrown open, and a slender, middle-aged man made his appearance, revolver in hand. He had the look of having been suddenly awakened out of sleep.

"What's broke?" he demanded.

Then, realizing the situation of affairs, he leaped upon Gladys, wrenched the knife from her and hurled her against the wall.

"Stow that!" he cried. "Can't come no sich games in this shanty!"

He glared around, threateningly.

"I'm dead fer sleep, I am, mammy; but I kin snooze in this cheer tell the boss gits back. Yelp, ef that she cat shows her claws ag'in, an' I'll come a-jumpin'!"

He dropped into a chair, twisted himself into as comfortable a position as possible and composed himself for a nap.

"Tain't no use!" said the old woman, grinning. "Not when Sam's around, 'tain't. He sleeps as light as a leaf a-fallin'. Might's well put up that knife, my dear!"

Gladys had slipped it into the pocket with the precious revolver. Fearing a search when Ishmael returned, and knowing that that would reveal both, she replaced it on the cupboard shelf.

The temptation to shoot the sleeping Sam was strong within her. But she realized that it would probably only make matters worse. The removal of the man would not lessen the giddy lights of those rocky barriers beyond which lay liberty. The intervening space, doubtless, was swarming with outlaws. And then she had a shuddering dread of taking human life.

Quivering and sobbingly she crept to Paul's side, kissed his pain-distorted face and smoothed his dark hair back from the sweaty forehead.

"Oh, Paul," she cried, passionately, "is it thus we meet after our terrible separation?"

She wound her arms about his neck and

her tears fell like rain upon his uncovered head.

"Very purty, my dear!" said the old woman, rocking herself slowly. "If Sam wasn't so beatin' tired I'd wake him up ag'in to see it."

Gladys paid no heed to her crowing; and continued to pour her sorrowful plaint into Paul's willing ears.

Then Taylor came back, with a rush and a curse, followed by his men.

"Tumble 'em out, now, lively!" he cried.

"Garland's makin' his second trip along the ledges and he won't be apt to make another. Them fellers don't calc'late on comin' up the crick!"

Paul and Gladys were hurried out in hot haste, and the entire party set off by a well-defined path leading up the rocky ridge.

Half-way up they came to the mouth of a cave. This they entered, pursuing it, until it emerged, by way of a tunnel cut by human hands, upon one of the lowest ledges of the opposite side.

Gladys could not understand what was intended, and her fears painted the picture in its darkest colors.

Soon John Garland rode from behind a clump of bushes and advanced along the rocky slope below them.

At sight of him Gladys uttered the cry that drew his gaze upward.

Doubtless Taylor intended that she should, for, until that moment, he made no motion toward preventing so natural an act.

Then Garland leaped from his horse, and an instant later was struggling in the hands of the miscreants who had been concealed in the bushes.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

HUCKLEBERRY'S FAILURE.

JONAS HUCKLEBERRY thundered after Garland at his best gait. It had been a long and tiresome ride to one in his weakened condition, but the little man possessed a will of iron and had held steadily on his way.

Once he caught sight of Garland as the latter mounted a slope, but he could not overtake him, and it was useless to attempt to make him hear. A pistol-shot might have accomplished it, but the report was liable to reach ears for which it was not intended.

Garland was making his second trip along the base of the rocky slope when Huckleberry saw him again. The little man was on the point of advancing when his quick eyes caught a view of moving figures on the terrace. The distance was too great for the unaided vision.

"Fowls o' the air!" he exclaimed, straightening up in the stirrups. "Is that the wing o' a bird or is it the flutter o' a dress? Sing'lar place fer a female!"

He slipped down, lariatied the pony, and then climbed to the top of the nearest hill. Dropping behind a rock, he fished a small but powerful field-glass from a pocket in his dilapidated coat and leveled it at the ridge.

"Las Animas Luke, er I'm a chimpanzee!" he cried, almost dropping the glass in his astonishment. "An' he's tied up like a bale o' hay!"

He leveled the glass again, surveying the group critically.

"An' I s'pose that's Garland's darter. A p'izen crowd, an' they're a-layin' fer the ole gent as sure as guns!"

He drew his revolver, intending to fire it, in the hope that Garland would hear the report, and be drawn away from the dangerous locality.

"No use!" he muttered, letting the weapon slip back into his pocket. "If they're really a-layin' fer him, they'll down him with their guns, if he tempts to edge away. Better be capterd than killed, I calc'late!"

He leveled the glass again, directing it this time at the young man.

As Huckleberry closely studied the features and appearance of the youth, his face took on all the changes of surprise, uncertainty and positive doubt.

"Can't be Luke!" he exclaimed, looking again. "Thought it was, shore, at the fu'st peep. This chap ain't rigged out fer clo'es at all like Luke was, an' he ain't got any mustache! Must be the identical boy they've been mistakin' Luke fer all the time. Don't blame 'em, fer I thought it myself a minit ago."

Huckleberry could scarcely contain him-

self as he watched the struggle that soon after took place.

"Got him!" he whispered, tip-toeing behind the sheltering rock. "Raked him in like a grab-net!"

He dropped down and again leveled the glass. Garland was lying upon the rocks bound; and Taylor was gloating over him. How Huckleberry wished he could increase his hearing, as he had increased his visual power!

What thoughts passed through his mind, as he crouched there, clasping the glass and closely watching Taylor, as the minutes fled? Who can tell? His chest heaved, his breath came pantingly, and his ferret-like eyes revealed a smoldering and hidden fire.

The story or interview ended, the sun sunk; and Taylor's party vanished behind the bushes, with their captives.

"I'm goin' over therel" said Huckleberry, rising and putting away the glass. "Yes! There's gobs o' mystery over there, an' I'm a-goin' to look into it. Mebbe I can git Garland and the young folks away from them villyuns!"

He climbed down the hill, bolted a hasty meal, and hopped the pony in a grassy valley. He supposed he would not be gone long, and that therefore the pony would not be likely to stray far.

Then, in the fast gathering darkness, he stole away toward the point where the remarkable scenes of the evening had been enacted.

He believed that behind that fringe of bushes on the terrace there was an opening of some kind, into which the outlaws had vanished. He could not understand how they could have disappeared so quickly, if such an opening did not exist. Whether that opening led to a robber cave or into a gorge or valley, he was not prepared to say. That was one point he hoped to elucidate.

The darkness, he thought, would favor such a search, by concealing his movements from the watchful eyes of any sentinels that might be posted on the crags.

"I can go in there if any livin' man can!" he muttered as he advanced cautiously through the thickening gloom. "I've got the spot marked down so't I can't miss it. I've played weasel before! If them pris'ners can be found at all, I'll git 'em out o' there er make a mighty try of it!"

Nevertheless he found it no small task to locate the exact place where Garland had been set upon by Taylor's men. He had all the peculiarities of the location plainly marked in his memory; but the night was quite dark and there was no trail. The faint starlight, which was his only reliance, was obscured now and then by drifting clouds.

After reaching the base of the semi-circular ridge, he crept about for an hour before he became positive that he had touched at the right place.

Then he began to crawl slowly and cautiously up the slope.

To any one above, his figure, if visible, would have seemed only a fantastic shadow sprawled upon the ground in human semblance. The shadow scarcely appeared to move, so slow was his progress. No more sound was produced than if it had been a real shadow trailing across the rocks.

Inch by inch he worked his way upward, worming along like a half-torpid serpent.

Finally he reached the ledge, drew himself upon it, and lay there for a long time, resting and looking about.

What he had supposed to be a boulder at last as he stared at it, took on the form of a man. The boulder was really a sentinel, sitting by the side of a rock, in front of the bushes. His head was drooped forward on his breast.

"The noblest Roman o' them all!" Huckleberry chuckled. "Asleep on duty, though he knows the penalty's death. I'm obleeged to him; fer, likely it saves me the trouble o' knockin' him on the head."

He began a gliding, sidling motion that eventually placed the rock between the sentinel and himself, and brought him to the opposite side of the bushy fringe.

A well-like hole, seeming a round patch of deepest darkness, yawned before him. He crawled up to it, and felt of the edges; then thrust his feet as far in as he could.

"A well er a tunnel! Drat the pesky

thing! How am I to find out what it is? I don't want to drap in there an' drowned!"

He scratched his head in thought and peered about.

"If I had a pole!"

But he hadn't; and none seemed near.

He determined that he must take some risks. It would not do to slide heedlessly into unknown depths. He drew out a metallic match-case, opened it carefully and extracted a match. Then he leaned far into the opening.

"If the feller should hear me er see the light, it'll s'prise him so that I'll have a chance to git away. Got to do it! Can't tumble in hyer head-first; an' I jes' ain't a-goin' back 'thout I hev to."

He scratched the match gently on the handle of his knife; and, when it burst into a flame, tossed it far into the opening. It flared, sputtered and went out. But that momentary glimpse revealed the character of the entrance.

"A tunnel, leadin' apeerently into the bowels of the mountain! Jumps off purty smart at the start, and then goes straight ahead. Hyer's to foller it!"

He swung over and dropped to the level below; then advanced, carefully feeling the sides of the tunnel with his hands, and pushing his feet cautiously out before him at every step.

The tunnel, as the reader knows, ended in a natural cave. This cave had few galleries. The floor was composed of sand, into which the feet sunk almost noiselessly. Yet the fact that the walls widened away confused Huckleberry, and rendered him almost helpless. He knew he wanted to go in a certain direction, but realized that he might have lost his bearings by the twistings of the tunnel or become turned around since emerging into the cave.

In his despair he struck another match, and examined his pocket compass.

"South southeast! that's the direction I want to foller to keep in a line with my startin' p'int. Where it'll fetch me, though, I don't know. Mebbe into a hole, an' mebbe into a blind pocket."

"Thought I'd strike somethin' alive when I struck a cave. I reckon if they's anybody lives hyer, they've buried themselves in the sand!"

He tossed the match in front of him and proceeded with the same caution he had all along observed.

The direct route chanced to be the right one, and led him, in course of time, to the opening into the valley. As he stepped out into the pale starlight and looked down into the basin, he could see a light here and there.

"Houses!" he exclaimed in astonishment. "Cities o' sin! There's a town buried away hyer in these hills. That jes' lays my calc'lations out stiff! Wonder if they've got street railways an' a police force. Every town what is a town has to hev them!"

"Didn't figger on findin' anything but a robbers' cave, when I commenced this s'arch, an' hyer I've unairthed a town. Stumps me! Nevertheless I'll hev to leave my card with the jailer, an' inquire after our friends."

He descended slowly, and on reaching the valley skulked like a shadow until he gained the group of houses.

He could see men walking about and at several of the cabins heard the sounds of voices. He listened carefully at each one, and then moved on to the next.

He had almost circled the village when he came to the cabin used as a prison. There were suspicious sounds here; and he remained for a long time with his ear glued to the wall.

From one room came the sound of subdued weeping and from another, at long intervals, a smothered groan.

Huckleberry crawled around the house; and, finding a door open, essayed to enter.

He was at once seized by the hair, his assailant setting up a series of piping screams.

"Sam! Sam! Help! Help! Oh, Sam!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

A WICKED PLOT.

"It's of no use, Gabe Taylor! I defy you to do your worst. Not even to save my own life will I comply with your demands."

"Think of your daughter in the power of these men. And such men!"

Garland understood the threat, but remained stubbornly silent.

"Come!" said Taylor, frowning. "I have parleyed long enough. Will you write what I want?"

"No!" savagely.

"Not even to save your daughter?"

There was a fiendishness in the tone that fairly chilled Garland's blood.

He clinched his fist, as if to strike down the human devil who stood before him.

"Hear me, Gabe Taylor! If you repeat those words I will kill you where you stand. The presence of your men will not save you. There is a demon stirring in my heart, now, that bids me strike you dead."

"Consequences! What does a madman care for consequences? And you are making a madman of me, Taylor!"

Gabe Taylor's face paled and he shrunk slightly before that burning gaze.

"You know I can rack you, Garland, if I choose!" he hissed. "Don't drive me too far. You may live to regret it."

"I have no fear of your threatened tortures. My hands are free. The first man that advances to bind them will be a dead man. You can kill me, but you cannot shackle me without paying a life for it."

Garland drew himself to his full height, looking like a desert-king surrounded by a group of snarling hyenas.

Taylor's face took on a sickly hue of baffled rage. He knew Garland, and realized that any attempt to bind or coerce him, in his present frame of mind, would result in the death of some of the outlaws. John Garland was wrought up to a point that made him absolutely regardless of his own life.

"I will not write the letter you want! I have wronged Monckton too greatly already, and all through your devilish wiles, and deceptions, Gabe Taylor! Shall I increase his bad opinion of me? Not while I have the right use of my faculties!"

"Very well! Have it your own way, Garland. I really don't need your assistance. I wouldn't have mentioned the matter to you at all, if I had had a specimen of your handwriting. We never had much correspondence in the days of our friendship, you know!" with a grating laugh; "but, it really don't matter! You can sit there and eat out your heart of fire while I supervise the preparation of the missive. The question of identity of hand-writing can be easily explained."

He turned to one of the men in waiting. "Call Scribbler!"

In answer to the summons, a pale, clerkly-looking young man entered, and stood quietly in waiting.

"Allow me to introduce you to the famous penman of the Mountain Wolves! Mr. Garland, Mr. Scribbler! And I hope you will learn, in time, to appreciate the remarkable talents of the young man as I do."

Scribbler bowed and drew his thin lips into a straight line across his face. He intended this facial contortion for a smile.

"In many respects, Mr. Garland, Scribbler is the most valuable man on our force. He has had quite a varied experience; and when you place a pen in his hand he is a genius. For years his study and delight has been the imitation of the handwriting of other people."

"For some reason this ability was not appreciated by the effete East. Scribbler got so he could write just like a number of moneyed men and bank presidents of that section. They complained of this delicate style of flattery; and Scribbler emigrated. But you know this is a world of compensations; and their loss is our gain."

"Now, Scribbler, if you will produce your tools, we will get to work."

Scribbler drew his lips again into a straight line, and took from a small valise pens, ink and paper.

When he had arranged them satisfactorily, Taylor chuckled and gave Garland a sardonic look.

"It will not be necessary to imitate any particular hand-writing this time, Scribbler. Our friend here refuses to accommodate us with a sample of his; and he is the gentleman we will represent to-day. So you can write in any style that suits you best."

"To begin: Date your letter from Cottonwood Falls, on Canyon Creek. Address it to Jim Congdon at the Garland Ranch."

"You've got that down?" looking at Garland instead of the writer.

"This letter, you understand, is written by John Garland! Tell Congdon, stating it in the first person, that Garland and his force of cowboys are at Cottonwood Falls."

"In continuing, you may use a form something like this:

"We have scouts out now watching the movements of Monckton's men, who are also in the hills, as you know. Monckton is looking for his son, I believe he is beginning to suspect me of double-dealing, and fear he may attack me before I can fully carry out my plans."

"Paul and Gladys are with us. I intend to send Gladys East, at once. Then I intend to hold Paul for ransom, pretending, of course, that he is held by outlaws."

"That will have quite a tendency to increase the friendly feeling he already entertains for you!" this to Garland, with a meaning look.

"And fully proves you to be the friend I thought," was Garland's instant retort.

Taylor laughed and turned again to Scribbler.

"Drove ahead too fast, did I? Well, you'll catch up, directly."

He drummed lightly on his chair until the cessation of the movements of the pen showed that Scribbler was again waiting.

"I hope you have about recovered from the wounds given you by the Utes. I wasn't expecting the rascals to make a raid, but they rather played into our hands, after all—excepting, of course, the treatment they gave you."

"I pressed them so hard that they were forced to abandon the cattle, which are now scattered through the foot-hills. They will do no great harm there, and we will round them up after we play out this present game."

"There! Jab that down, Scribbler, as fast as you can!"

"What do you intend to do with that pretended letter when you get it finished?" Garland asked, coldly.

"Send it to Congdon, of course! What should I do with it?"

"That's the style of letter you wanted to dictate to me, eh? Well, it's a good thing for you that you have a conscienceless forger at your elbow. The tortures of the Middle Ages couldn't have made me write it. Of course you intend it for Monckton. The letter you asked me to write was for Monckton, you said. Congdon will never see that letter. If he should, and it was in my own handwriting, he would know that it did not reflect my sentiments or contain one word of truth."

"Very heroic, friend Garland! You ought to have adopted the stage as a profession. You wasted your talents by becoming a cattleman!"

Scribbler again drew his thin lips into a straight line, and looked up.

"Ready, eh?" Taylor questioned. "This is a very interesting communication, and we must hasten. As a work of fiction it is immense. Do you suppose it would take a prize, Scribbler, if we should bundle it off to some publisher? Well, proceed:

"The men I sent to carry away Gladys, for the purpose of blinding Monckton, bungled the thing terribly. The shooting of the man I left to watch over you was purely accidental. The fellow that did the shooting had a spite against him, and I at first thought it was a case of deliberate murder. I would have had him lynched for it, but his comrades assured me it was an unavoidable accident. I have watched him closely since, and have reason to think they told the truth."

"Get that down as quick as you can!"

He twisted about uneasily under Garland's burning gaze; and was not sorry when Scribbler announced that he was ready to go on.

"The capture of Gladys was, as you understand, simply a device to justify my coming into the hills with a force. I have a right to pursue the abductors of my daughter."

"Paul has been held here all the time by trusty men. They will play outlaws, and demand a ransom sufficiently large to pay us all handsomely."

"When it is delivered I propose to fall upon Monckton and wipe him out, root and branch, with all his aiders and sympathizers."

He halted at every paragraph, to accommodate his speed to that of the writer.

"To do that will require a large force. Gather all the men you can and hurry them to Cottonwood Falls. If you are not able to get about, employ a substitute. I will honor whatever bills you make. Remember that I must have men, and all I can get, no matter what the cost."

"Since coming into the hills I have received a severe injury to my right arm and shoulder, by a fall from my horse. This has made it necessary for me to dictate this letter to an amanuensis. I make this statement, fearing the difference in handwriting may lead you to distrust its authenticity."

"Faithfully yours,

"J HN GARLAND."

"Quite a work of art, is it not?" looking up at Garland, with a sneer. "You see, when Gabe Taylor undertakes a thing, he is not to be balked. That letter will accomplish all that it could have done had you been the writer instead of Scribbler."

Garland disdained to reply.

"I suppose you know that your men are now camped at Cottonwood Falls? I am pretty well posted, friend Garland, and the mention of Cottonwood Falls was not an inadvertence.

"Your men are lying there, not knowing what to do since your mysterious disappearance. They are still sending out search parties, but they are puzzled and discouraged and like an army without a leader.

"When Monckton discovers they are there he will be convinced of the entire truthfulness of the letter. He will attack them; and the chances are nine out of ten that he will be killed.

"It is a good scheme, friend Garland, to make your enemies fight your battle for you. That has been my plan. You and Monckton would have met long ago, if you had not been too cowardly or too cautious. I have no love for either your cowboys or Monckton's, and it will gratify me to watch them cut each other to pieces."

"Strike at my heart with your poisoned tongue as much as you like!" said Garland, scornfully, averting his face, "you have the whip now. You will not make me cower, no matter how fiendish the blows. So strike while you can; for as sure as there is a God in heaven my time will come!"

"Bah!" Taylor cried, sneeringly. "You make me think of some old woman, weighted down with prophecies and quibbling superstitions.

"Send Slippery Sam here!" addressing one of the men in waiting. "This message must be hurried through!"

CHAPTER XXX.

THE PLOT CONSUMMATED.

SLIPPERY SAM made his appearance, with a bow and a grin.

"Ticular orders from the boss, hey?"

"Take this letter!" ordered Taylor. "It is written to Jim Congdon, at the Garland Ranch. If it was to be delivered to him, though, any of the boys would do. I sent for you because it is a job requiring shrewdness and cunning."

Slippery Sam scraped a foot and gave to the grin greater dimensions.

"Monckton's party is out in the hills. You are to fall into their hands accidentally. The letter is really intended for Monckton, though you are to pretend that you are Garland's messenger on your way with it to Congdon. Look it over; and then work the thing out in your own way. You'll know how!"

Slippery Sam took the letter, bowed again, and retreated from the cabin. A little later he was mounted and on his way out of the valley.

It was yet early morning; and he set off very deliberately for the point where Monckton's men were reported to be.

Late in the afternoon he came in sight of them, camped in a grassy valley, apparently resting after the fatigues of the day.

He made a wide detour, so that he might approach them under cover of some rocks and bushes, and thus seem to have stumbled upon them unwittingly.

The approach was made without discovery; and Monckton's cowboys were startled by seeing an unknown horseman ride almost into their camp.

"Who goes there?" shouted Monckton, jumping to his feet and drawing a weapon.

Sam uttered a curse, wheeled his horse and attempted to dash away.

"Halt!" cried Monckton. "If you attempt to run I will fire!" and he drew his revolver and lifted it as he spoke.

The horseman paid no heed to the command, other than to bend forward upon his steed's neck and dig his spurs into its flanks.

Monckton fired, purposely aiming high, for he did not wish to kill the stranger. Sam gained the shelter of the bushes. His horse limped, however—as it had done when it first made its appearance—and the speed he attained was not great.

"After him!" shrieked Monckton, foaming now with excitement. "He's recognized us or he wouldn't run that way. And

that proves that he's got a reason for running."

The cowboys needed no second bidding. There was a wild rush for saddles and bridles; and a few moments later a half-dozen of them were plunging toward the fringe of scrub. Monckton's horse had been lariatied out with its saddle on; and he was thus able to lead the chase.

When the bushes were gained, the horseman was brought once more into plain view. He was heading for a canyon that led eastwardly, and was lashing his horse at every jump it made.

Notwithstanding this the animal was making very slow progress. It was lame, and it seemed to get lamer at every leap.

"Take him alive!" howled Monckton, puffing and panting as he urged on his big, raw-boned steed. "He can't get away from you. Take the rascal alive!"

The wiry cow-ponies got down to their work with a vigor and dash that brought them up with the limping animal, hand over hand. The cowboys began to yell as they saw that the fugitive could scarcely escape them. As for the latter, he only cast an occasional frightened glance over his shoulder and continued to belabor the straining horse.

Monckton was bawling himself red in the face in his efforts to encourage his men.

"Get there!" he cried, hoarsely. "Break your backs, you creepers! Go 'long! Ten dollars to the man that first lays hands on the rascal! Take him alive! No shooting, mind you! Take him alive!"

The horseman uttered a cry of fright, as he saw them thus drawing near. Apparently he realized that he could not escape by means of the horse. He abandoned the animal and ran nimbly for the hills.

But, in a chase of that kind the fastest human speed could avail nothing against those wiry ponies.

"Halt!" shouted the foremost cowboy, clicking his revolver ominously.

"Halt!" screamed Monckton, bobbing along on his powerful horse.

The fugitive paid no attention to the calls, but ran along with rare fleetness.

The cowboy slipped the weapon into place, set his teeth hard, leaned over, and roweled his pony mercilessly. The animal shot forward with a bound that placed it alongside the fleeing man. The cowboy's muscular hand shot out, the fingers closed on the collar of the coat and the fugitive was literally jerked from his feet and held against the side of the plunging animal until its terrific speed could be checked.

"Who are you?" yelled Monckton, who came up as the cowboy released his grasp. Monckton was panting and gasping like a landed fish.

For answer the man, with a lightning-like movement, drew something from his breast, rolled it into a knot and popped it into his mouth. It was the letter.

"Drop that!" yelled the cowboy, springing for Sam's throat. The force with which he closed his fingers upon the rascal's windpipe, caused the latter to open his mouth with a sudden jerk. Sam wriggled and squirmed and the pressure was increased until he fairly grew black in the face.

"Don't go fer to swallerin' yer diamonds!" gritted the cowboy. "Ef you do, I'll jist everlastin'ly choke out yer innards."

"Now, what ye got in yer mouth? Spit it out, I say; er I'll tear it out an' bring yer black tongue along with it!"

Sam gasped, but continued to wriggle, and the cowboy tightened his grip until the wad of paper fell from Sam's lips to the ground.

The cowboy released his hold and Sam staggered backward, clutching at his throat and gasping for breath.

"What is it?" queried Monckton, taking the paper from the cowboy's hands. "A letter!"

He untwisted it and began to smooth out the wrinkles.

Sam who had been clawing at his throat and backing away from the crowd, now sprung toward the protecting bushes.

If he really intended to get away he was not quick enough. One of the cowboys had been watching him closely; and bounded in instant pursuit. Others followed and two minutes after, Sam was brought back with a lariat bound about his legs and wrists.

Monckton was staring, with protruding eyes and open mouth, at the letter. The contents seemed to daze him.

"Gr-eat guns!" he at first managed to articulate.

"What's your name, sir?" he demanded, advancing in a threatening way and flourishing the letter.

Slippery Sam shrunk back as if trying to burrow into the earth.

"Tom, sir! Tom Clayton!" he faltered.

"And you come from Garland?"

"I—I—"

"Stop!" cried Monckton. "Don't commence to lie, now. I have the evidence here in my own hand. You were carrying this letter from Garland to one of his cowboys!"

Sam glanced about in a helpless, hopeless way, but did not reply.

"You belong to Garland's party, I suppose? When did you join it? You are not one of his old cowboys!"

Again Sam glanced about, a pleading look in his eyes.

"Answer my question!" shouted Monckton, trembling with rage and nervousness. "When did you join Garland's force?"

"Day before yisterday, sir!" Sam replied, humbly.

"And he sent you with this message to Jim Congdon? Where are Garland's men, now?"

"Cottonwood Falls, sir!"

"Well, do you know whose hands you have fallen into?"

Sam repeated that pleading look.

"Speak out! You've got a tongue!"

"Must be Monckton's, sir!"

"Ah! What did Garland say about then?"

"Said I must be careful not to fall into their hands!"

"And you obeyed by walking right into their camp?"

"My pony got lame or I c'u'd 'a' run away!" Sam explained, deprecatingly.

"What's the matter with the pony?" Monckton asked of the man who had caught it.

"It's a foot's cut!" replied the man. "Must 'a' stepped on a rock that was as sharp as a knife."

"Well, now, Clayton!" said Monckton, in a calmer voice than he had yet used. "We haven't anything against you. You are training with a bad crowd, but perhaps you don't know it. This letter reveals one of the most hellish plots I ever heard of. You may as well understand, now, that you will never get to deliver it."

"You have really done me a favor by stumbling on us as you did and allowing it to fall into our hands. Forewarned is forearmed! Garland proposes to crush me and my band of cowboys. I will take the initiative and the chances are that the crusher will be crushed."

"To-morrow you must pilot us against Garland's men at Cottonwood Falls!"

Sam wailed out his unwillingness to do so; but Monckton was determined and had him borne back to the camping-place and put under guard for the night.

But bonds and guards could seldom hold Slippery Sam. When morning came it was discovered that he had vanished.

"To your saddles, men!" came the command in Monckton's passionate voice. "That scoundrel will carry word of our coming. He has been gone these two hours, I judge. But he is on foot and we can pass if we do not overhaul him. We must strike Garland's force before they can have time to receive warning and place themselves on the defensive!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

A FIASCO.

HUCKLEBERRY was bewildered by the sudden assault of the old woman and her frantic screams for help.

She was extremely muscular for one of her age and appearance, and she had the little man at a great disadvantage. He had crept in on his hands and knees. Thus she had literally fallen on him, as she gripped him by the hair; and the pressure of her weight, added to her strength, held his face against the floor.

Huckleberry struggled and kicked and endeavored to wriggle out of her grasp. He would have accomplished this in a few minutes; but Sam bounded to the aid of his

mother, and Huckleberry found himself a captive.

"Strike a light, mother!" commanded Sam, as he sat astride of Huckleberry's neck. "Let's see what we've got hyer! Twists like an eel!"

As the light illuminated the room it revealed to Huckleberry's straining vision the bound form of the young man he had seen upon the rocky terrace with Gladys. From the gagged lips of this young man had come the smothered groans.

"Well, this hyer gits me!" exclaimed Sam, as the lamplight fell upon his captive. "Fetch that rope, mother, and tie him up tight as a box. It's the little old chap that tackled us on the trail when we corraled his pardner! How'd he come hyer?"

The old woman produced the rope and knotted it deftly about Huckleberry's wrists and ankles.

"None o' that, now!" yelled Sam, warningly, as the little man showed signs of resistance. "Ef ye tempt me I'll stick a knife into ye!"

Seeing that escape was impossible, Huckleberry submitted philosophically.

"Goin' to tie me up like a kickin' cow, air ye? Well, now, I hope 't you won't draw the knots so tight that they'll eat my hands off. I 'low you ain't no 'sylum fer cripples out hyer!"

The crone eased the knots a little at this protest.

"Thankee most kindly," said Huckleberry, puckering his mouth into a grin. "P'raps I kin return the fayvor some time. Now, if you'll let me set up, I'll be everlastin' obleeged."

Sam got off of the little man's neck, and permitted him to shuffle up against the wall.

"Got another pore creeper in harness," said Huckleberry, sniffing. "This is a tryin' worl! Now, what's he done?"

"Don't know as it's any o' your bizness!" Sam returned, curtly. "He talked too blamed much, an' we put a stopper in his mouth, same's we'll do you, ef you ain't keeful!"

"Run out, mother, an' look up the boss er Capt'in Ishmull! I want to know how this feller got in hyer, when all the av'news air guarded."

"Flew over the wall, I did!" Huckleberry interposed, chuckling. "I'm a two-winged bat, I am, an' I jes' sailed. The dark is so thick out there you can 'most walk on it."

The old woman threw a faded shawl over her head, and hurried out into the night.

"You're a joker, you air," said Sam, seating himself deliberately before his prisoner, and producing a revolver. "Mebbe this hyer won't be so funny, though, 'fore we git through with ye."

There was a hurried step on the grass, and Gabe Taylor came through the doorway.

"Hello!" he exclaimed, stopping before Huckleberry. "What kind of an orang-outang have you got there?"

"It's the cuss that flew into us so lively when we captered the young feller out on the trail. Didn't think he'd ever live to crawl this fur."

"Got a skull like a sun-baked rock," said Huckleberry, grinning.

Taylor frowned.

"No time for joking, as you may discover."

He squared himself before Huckleberry, and looked into the latter's eyes, as if he would read his very thoughts.

"What I want to know is, how you got in here and why! Answer straight, or you may have cause to regret it."

"As to why I come," said Huckleberry, unflinchingly returning the gaze, "I shouldn't think you'd need to ask. You took my pardner, and I come fer him. As to how I come I can't hardly tell myself."

"Why not?" questioned Taylor.

"'Cause I don't hardly know!"

"That's a lie!"

"Hev it your own way, stranger. If you know all about it, can't see as there's reely any need o' me sayin' anything!"

Taylor involuntarily placed his right hand on the revolver flapping against his hip.

"You might as well tell the truth first as last!"

"Hain't I tellin' it?" Huckleberry exclaimed, in evident disgust. "When I turn

my hull heart out fer you to look at you won't believe me."

"But you couldn't get in here without knowing how it was done."

"I did, jes' the same. I clim' to the top o' that air ridge off yon, this afternoon, an' seen these hyar shanties squattin' in this hole. I hunted fer a place to git down, and the dark come afore I could find it. I kep' on a-huntin', an' finally slipped down hyer, k'plunk! I don't know where the place was, an' I don't know how I done it. All't one't my feet slipped out from under me an' I jes' flew. I thought fer a little while after I landed that I was dead. Then I come 'round, see'd these lights an' crep' up hyer."

"You don't mean to say that you fell off of those cliffs? The fall would have killed you."

"I told you that you jes' wouldn't believe me nohow," with a deprecating air. "I knowed you wouldn't!"

"But it isn't reasonable!"

"No, 'tain't," reflectively. "I wouldn't hardly believe that myself, if I didn't hev to. But what else can I say? You wouldn't hev me lie, would ye?"

Taylor walked about for a few moments, in an uneasy mood, then turned to Slippery Sam.

"Watch him till I come back, Sam! I'm going to visit the sentinels. If one man can get into the valley without our knowledge, a dozen or a hundred can."

Sam nodded in assent and picked up his revolver.

"I'm to down him, ef he wriggles er squeaks, I reckon? Mebbe there's more of 'em creepin' 'round the camp."

"Shoot him if there's an attempt at rescue."

With this command Taylor strode out into the gloom and disappeared.

He did not return for nearly an hour.

"Sentinels are awake and all right," he said, on re-entering. "It looks like the fellow told the truth, though it seems a tough yarn. The chances are about one in a thousand that a man falling from those ledges would not be killed. That's the way it looks. He might have come over by means of a rope. I've had the camp thoroughly searched, and he has no comrades in it. And no rope can be found hanging from any of the rocks."

He evidently knew that Huckleberry would stick to the lie, if it was one, for he made no attempt at concealing his thoughts.

"This young man didn't believe me when I tol' him I flew down hyer!" said Huckleberry, with an injured air.

"I don't take it all for Gospel truth!" retorted Taylor. "Maybe it's true and maybe it isn't. I don't know that it matters much, though, how you got in here. You brought no one with you to carry back the news, and you'll not get out in a hurry."

Huckleberry gave a doleful groan and collapsed.

"That fellow," continued Taylor, pointing to the bound form of the young man and paying no attention to Huckleberry's groan, "must be got out of here before daylight. I have the men selected to take charge of him and you must watch him carefully until the time comes."

"I expect to get a big haul of money by means of him. Negotiations will be commenced immediately with Monckton, and I want the young man at the cabin out in the hills. Monckton may doubt that we have him in our possession, and there the fact can be ocularly demonstrated, if necessary, without endangering the secrets of our den here."

That the young man was conscious of passing events could be told by his writhing, as Taylor's words fell on his ears.

Huckleberry looked at him closely. The resemblance to Las Animas Luke was so striking that the little man was astounded.

"It must be him!" he murmured. "An', yit, it can't be. Luke didn't hev on no sich a suit o' clo'es as that and he did hev on a mustache. Mysteries o' the Egyptians! It beats me, it does; plum! One minit I think it's him; an' the next minit I know it ain't. If Luke on'y had a twin brother, now!"

"You see that gag?" Taylor demanded of Huckleberry. "He wouldn't keep his mouth shut to-day and we made him. He'll know enough to mind me when we gets through

with it. If he can work his jaws for a week after, it will be a wonder. And we'll serve you the same, if you defy us!"

With this parting shot, he withdrew.

Slippery Sam got up, locked the door and then carefully examined the bonds of the prisoners.

"I'm goin' to turn in, now!" he said. "But remember that me an' the ole 'oman sleeps jest like cats. Ef you so much as breathe hard I'll hear ye."

He extinguished the light and crept softly away, leaving Huckleberry to his own reflections.

For a full half-hour the little man lay perfectly quiet. Then he began to tug and strain at his bonds. He had this in view when he asked the crone to loosen them slightly.

His hands were small, compared with the size of his wrists, and he knew that the rope must be drawn tight indeed which he could not slip out of.

He worked with the greatest care and caution, stopping every little while to hearken.

At last, to his intense satisfaction, he found one hand free.

To free the other was a comparatively easy task. Then he slowly untied the knots that held his feet.

After he was perfectly free he lay fully ten minutes sprawled out on the floor, listening to the chirping of the crickets, and working the muscles of his arms and limbs to restore the circulation.

He drew himself up again, removed his shoes, and crawled softly in the direction of his fellow-prisoner.

The young man aroused himself with a start, as Huckleberry's hand fell on him.

"Keep still, Paul er Luke, er whoever ye air! Don't breathe, if you can help it; an' I'll hev you out o' hyer in a jiffy!"

The floor shook, there was a cat-like spring and Slippery Sam leaped through the open doorway communicating with the adjoining room. His knees struck Huckleberry fairly in the back, completely bowling him over.

"Thought I was nappin', did ye? Well, ole hoss, you was left that time!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

HUCKLEBERRY ESCAPES!

THE old crone came to Sam's assistance, and Huckleberry was soon in a worse condition than before. The ropes were double-knotted and drawn so tight they fairly cut into the flesh.

This was not accomplished without a struggle. Indeed, Huckleberry fought like a wild-cat, and only succumbed when he was knocked almost senseless.

"I'll slice ye, ef you try that ag'in!" growled Sam, waving a murderous looking knife before the eyes of the prostrate man. "I'd 'a' done it this time 'fore I'd allowed you to got away. Chew on that, will ye? An' think twic't 'fore you make another break!"

He went back to his bunk; but this time left the light burning brightly in the room.

Shortly after midnight Gabe Taylor reappeared, with several followers, and the young man whom Huckleberry had tried to rescue was borne away.

"Luck's ag'in' me this trip!" muttered the little man, under his breath. "I s'pose t'other pris'ners air some'eres about, but it don't look much like I'd be able to help 'em. Them strings air pulled so everlastin' tight, wrigglin' don't seem to do any good."

At intervals he imagined he heard the sounds of sobbing and weeping in the adjoining room, and judged that the young lady was confined there. Huckleberry with all his eccentricities, was as tender-hearted as a child, and his sympathies went out in a great wave toward the stricken girl.

"I'd help you, little 'un, if I could; but I can't! I'm tied up jes' like a turkey gobbler day 'fore Thanksgiving!"

Realizing that escape was impossible, Huckleberry tried to gain some sleep. He was weak and worn out. His bruised head throbbed with feverish pain. He had washed the blood from it and bound it up the previous day. But he had removed the handkerchief before entering the valley. The wound was in the nature of a bruise and there had been very little effusion of blood to render a bandage necessary. It had been a stunning blow, bringing temporary unconsciousness

and weakening the system by the violence of the shock. He had held up bravely until now; when he felt he *must* have rest.

His slumber was broken and restless, but it did him a world of good, nevertheless. When he awoke the day was considerably advanced. Sam had gone with that deceptive message to Monckton; and the old crone seemed the only guard about the house.

Seeing that Huckleberry was awake she poked her head out of the door and spoke to a passer-by.

"The critter's hungry, I 'low!" she said, as the man came into the room. "Don't b'leeve in starvin' anybody! Sam's gone an' I'm afeard to trust him. Git out yer shooter while I ontie his hands an' git him some breakfuss."

The man was a sullen-looking fellow; and, as he drew his weapon he showed by his glances that the temptation would not have to be great to induce him to fire on the prisoner.

Huckleberry paid no heed to his murderous looks. He did not propose to make any movement that would justify an act of the kind. He knew he could not escape from the valley in daylight, even if he got safely out of the cabin. Therefore he offered no resistance to any of the acts of the old woman; eating his meal in silence and allowing himself to be again tied.

"Good fodder!" he said, when he had ended, wrinkling his face and smacking his lips. "I'm shore I'm greatly obleeged to you, ma'am. Makes me think o' the cookin' o' my ole mammy, when I was a boy!"

Was there ever a woman too old to be susceptible to the arts of the flatterer? The withered crone showed her ugly teeth in a satisfied smile and moved about in a brisker manner for the compliment. Henceforth, Huckleberry knew so far as he was concerned the wants of the inner man would not be neglected.

After the man had departed, Jonas tried to draw from the crone some bits of information. The effort was not successful. The old woman was not averse to talking; but when the subject approached the condition and probable fate of the prisoners or the contemplated movements of the outlaws she became dumb.

"Orders from Capt'in Ishmul, Mr. Huckleberry!" she said, for Jonas had told her his name. "Pintedly I can't answer them questions, hows'ever much I'd like to!"

Thus the day wore away; Jonas receiving dinner and supper in the same manner he had received breakfast. There always seemed to be some one near to answer the old woman's calls.

Huckleberry grew uneasy as night came on. He had tried by various artfully-worded hints to get the crone to slightly loosen his bonds, but all in vain. On that point she was adamant.

"You tried to git away las' night, Mr. Huckleberry an' I dassent. I s'pose they do hurt some; but Sam tied 'em, an' I dassent!"

Huckleberry carefully concealed his uneasiness. A mental survey of the possibilities and probabilities of effecting an escape did not tend to reassure him.

"I'm stuck!" he muttered gloomily. "Tain't any use tryin' to git them strings off."

But he could not slumber. The knowledge that he was guarded only by an old woman made him restless. Hour after hour he tossed about on the hard floor, writhing and groaning.

Suddenly he heard a muffled cry from the adjoining room. Then the sounds of a struggle, followed by feverish panting. A few minutes later a key turned in the lock, the door opened and Gladys entered.

Huckleberry could scarcely see the outlines of her form, but he knew that it was a young woman by the liteness and ease with which she glided along. With an effort he repressed the exclamation that arose to his lips.

"Are you in here, Paul?" questioned Gladys, bending forward in the gloom.

"If you mean the young man, miss, as I s'pose you do, why he's gone. They kerried him away last night."

"And you—you are the prisoner they brought in last evening? I thought it was you they removed. I tried to listen when you were talking to-day, but the walls are

thick and I could not determine whether it was your voice or Paul's. Oh, where have they taken him?"

"Dunno, miss!" replied Huckleberry. "But if you'll cut these strings I can talk better, I've no doubt. What did ye do to the old lady?"

"Oh, it was awful in me, Mr.—"

"Huckleberry! Which my fu'st name it air Jonas! What'd ye do?"

"She thought I was asleep," said Gladys, gliding toward the cupboard that contained the knives. "She sat there by the door a long time watching. Finally she nodded, her head dropped forward, and she began to snore."

"Actilly?"

Gladys, despite the terrors of her situation, could not repress a light laugh.

"Yes, she began to snore. I quietly gathered up a quilt, leaped upon her, and enveloped her in it. There was a rope hanging on the wall, and I wrapped that around her neck, arms and body. Do you suppose she will smother, Mr. Huckleberry?"

She was at his side now, sawing at his bonds.

A thrashing and thumping came from the other room.

"Hurry," urged Jonas. "She'll raise somebody by that rumpus."

The bonds fell from his hands, and he took the knife and quickly severed those holding his feet.

He was so stiff from the long confinement that he could scarcely move, but scrambled to his feet and hurried at his best gait into the room from which proceeded the sounds.

The old woman was coughing and strangling and bobbing about on the floor like a gigantic eel.

"Git a rag er a hank'cher and slip into her mouth when I tell ye!"

He began to remove the rope as he said this. When the rope was loosed he placed one hand on the crone's mouth, above the quilt, closing the fingers on her throat.

"We don't want to hurt her," he said, quietly, "but we've got to keep her from yelpin'. Now, if your hank'cher's ready, I'll tighten my grip an' throw the quilt off her head. If she gives one good scream, we'll never git out o' this valley."

Gladys slipped the handkerchief into the old woman's mouth, feeling uncomfortably guilty while doing it, and tightened and knotted it.

"Tie her hands and feet, miss. I 'low she can scratch an' claw like a wild cat. I ought to know, fer I've had some experience."

When the bonds had been properly applied, Huckleberry arose and moved toward the door.

"Somebody'll find you 'fore an hour. Hate to treat a woman that way, 'specially one who can set out sich good eatin'. But we jes' hev to on the present occasion."

Gladys followed him, touching him on the arm when they had gained the other room.

"Did you get to speak to Pau?" she queried.

"Was it Paul?" said Huckleberry, stopping.

"Why, yes; who else could it be?"

"Never heard o' Las Animas Luke, I reckon? He looked as much like that chap a'most as one pea looks like another'n. He was my pardner, Luke was, an' these coyotes captered him."

"And he is in the outlaw camp?"

"Dunno 'bout that. Dunno where he is. You got a good look at this feller?"

"Oh, yes! he spoke to me."

"An' it wasn't Luke?"

"He is Paul Monckton!"

"Well! Well! How this worl' does turn round. But time's a-flyin', miss, jes' as if it didn't keer whether we got out o' hyer er not."

"And we ought to imitate time?" naively.

"Yes, we ought. We'll hev to. Come!"

He took her hand and they emerged from the room and hurried away through the darkness.

"Halt! Who goes there?"

The command came, sharp and stern, followed by the click of a gun-lock.

The fugitives were feeling their way slowly toward the cave in the hillside.

"We must run fer it," whispered Huckleberry. "Stoop low. He can't hit us in the dark."

He closed his hand upon Gladys's wrist and darted away.

A stream of fire came from the rifle, accompanied by the suggestive screech of a ball.

The sentinel gave a yell and bounded in pursuit.

Huckleberry had started down the slope, and the course was likely to bring them into yet greater danger. So he swerved and ran down the valley.

The rifle-shot and the yell had aroused the outlaws, and they now swarmed from every direction with questioning calls.

"Abandon me, Mr. Huckleberry," cried Gladys, sinking tremblingly to the earth. "You must! I am exhausted, and we will both be retaken. If you can get away, probably you can bring help."

Huckleberry began a protest.

"I cannot go on at this rate, and you cannot carry me. It will simply result in both of us being taken. You must go, Mr. Huckleberry."

"I can fight," he said, grimly, drawing the knife which had severed his bonds—the only weapon he now had.

Gladys became frantic in her exhortation for him to leave her.

The cries of their pursuers were now frightfully near.

"Remember, 'tain't my wish," he exclaimed, turning at last to obey. "But I'll come ag'in; and I'll come with men at my heels!"

He dashed away among the rocks, leaving Gladys to fall again into the claws of the Mountain Wolves.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

ZEKE TAYLOR'S STORY.

"Oh, Mr. Monckton!"

An ungainly youth scrambled down the rocky slope, greatly to the surprise of Monckton and his men. They had no thought that there was a human being within many miles.

The ungainly youth was Zeke Taylor; and he advanced with feverish speed.

Monckton's party was on its way to Cottonwood Falls.

"We're in something of a hurry, Zeke!" said Monckton, as the young man drew near. "So, make your talk as short as possible."

The sudden appearance of Zeke, while it surprised, annoyed him. He knew the young man for a rattl-pated sort of fellow; and naturally supposed he intended to deliver himself of some foolish whim. Nevertheless, Monckton's kind heart and inner instincts bade him stop.

"What is it, Zeke?" he questioned, assuming an interest he did not feel.

"'Bout Paul!" replied Zeke, as he checked himself, almost out of breath. "'Bout your son, Paul. He's up yender!"

Zeke waved a hand in the direction from which he had come.

Monckton's assumed interest became strikingly real.

"What do you know about him?" he demanded.

"Well, ye see, sir, Mr. Monckton," said Zeke, sniffing. "I don't know much, but I'm honest! I thought pap was burnt up in the shanty, until he come fer me."

"I thought it was his ghost an' I tried to hide. Then he cussed me fer bein' a fool. Ever'body calls me a fool, Mr. Monckton!" wiping his eyes on the sleeve of his ragged jacket.

"I don't!" said Monckton. "An honest man, no matter what his circumstances, is much better than a rascally smart one."

"I'm honest, er try to be!" replied Zeke. "An' that's what brought me hyer."

"Oh, Mr. Monckton, pap's a robber!"

"What?"

"Pap's a robber! I didn't never know it tell lately er I'd 'a' run away. He burnt our shanty to throw the people off the track. 'Twasn't worth much an' so he burnt it!"

"Then he tuck me up into the mountains whare the robbers lives. They've got a town up there, Mr. Monckton!"

"Could you lead us to it?"

"M'feard not. They tuck me there in the night and brung me away in the night. An' they brung Paul with me."

"He's in a cabin up yender an' he's guarded by men. Pap lef me with 'em an' tole me ef I didn't stay there he'd hang me. And,

oh, Mr. Monckton, they're a-goin' to make you pay!"

"What? Pay! I don't know that I understand you."

"To git Paul back ag'in! They said you could have him ef you'd pay ten thousand dollars. I heard 'em talkin' when they thought I was asleep."

"A scheme for ransom, eh?" thundered Monckton, furiously. "Of course John Garland is at the bottom of it! I didn't think your father, though, would go into such a thing."

Zeke opened his dull eyes very wide.

"Garland's a pris'ner!"

"A what?"

"A pris'ner! The robbers has got him. Pap's a-holdin' him!"

A look of blank astonishment swept over Monckton's florid face.

"You must be mistaken, Zeke! Or else they have put up a game on you!"

Zeke shook his head doggedly.

"No I ain't, nuther! I see'd Garland in the cabin, all tied up with ropes, an' pap was a-swearin' at him terrible. Pap didn't know I was there. It was dark, an' I jest sneaked up. Oh, it's awful, Mr. Monckton, to know that your pap's that-a-way."

To say that Zeke's words created a sensation among Monckton's cowboys, puts it but feebly. They could scarcely believe the story or credit the evidence of their ears.

"But I captured a letter yesterday which Garland was sending to Jim Congdon. It told quite a different story."

This was an important point, and Monckton emphasized it strongly.

"I 'low pap writ it. When he was swearin' at Garland he was tryin' to git him to write somethin'!"

"But your father couldn't have written such a letter!" Monckton insisted. "He hasn't the necessary education!"

"Pap talks jest like a gentleman, now!" was the only reply Zeke could make to this. He was growing nervous under the rigid examination.

"I done the best I knowed, Mr. Monckton!" he pleaded. "I heerd the men say last night about where you an' your men was. Then, when they fell asleep, I slipped out to look fer ye. Ef 'tain't all right I kin go back; an' I won't say a word to nobody that I see'd ye!"

His lips were quivering under the imputations and doubts expressed in Monckton's stormy questions.

"Forgive me, Zeke!" said the latter. "I know you are perfectly honest and sincere. There isn't a better boy lives. I didn't mean to doubt your word. I was simply trying to find out whether or not you had been deceived."

"You say that Paul is in a guarded cabin off yonder? How many miles?"

"Dunno! A good many, I should say. I've been a-walkin' a long time!"

"And you can lead us there?"

"Straight as a string, Mr. Monckton!"

Zeke's face was clearing and the eager light was again coming into the eyes that were usually so heavy.

"Some 'un's a-comin'!" shouted one of the cowboys, pointing toward the crest of the ridge, where a horseman had come into view.

Zeke was standing by Monckton's big, raw-boned animal.

He turned his head in response to the cowboy's cry; then shrunk behind the horse.

"Don't let him see me," he wailed. "It's one of the men from the cabin. He'll kill me, I know he will, if he finds me hyer."

He was trembling in every limb.

"Wrap this around you and keep quiet, and he won't be likely to recognize you."

Monckton quickly unstrapped the blanket from behind the saddle and tossed it to Zeke.

The horseman, as soon as he caught sight of Monckton's men, spurred his horse into a quick gallop. He swerved the animal just before coming within fair rifle range, and caused it to describe a semi-circle. He drew back his right arm, as if bending a bow. There was a gleam of white, a whirring, whistling sound, and an arrow struck in the rocky soil about a hundred paces in advance of Monckton's men.

As soon as he had sped the arrow, the horseman wheeled and raced back over the ridge.

One of the cowboys ran and brought in the arrow. A piece of paper was twisted and tied about the shaft. This Monckton seized nervously, unwound it, and spread it out on his thigh.

It was in an unknown hand, and ran as follows:

"To COLONEL MILES MONCKTON:—"

"We have your son in our possession. Our object in holding him is money. If you are very anxious for his return to you, you will deposit ten thousand dollars in a box at the foot of the blasted pine on lower Canyon Creek. Ten thousand dollars is not a great deal to a man of your financial standing. It is a fortune to us. Unless it is paid, your son will never be restored to you alive."

"You may doubt that we have him in our possession. If so, place a note indicating that doubt at the foot of the pine, and we will arrange it so that one of your cowboys can come and take a look at him. You cannot see him until the money is paid."

"Of course we realize that it will probably take time for you to raise that sum of money. We give you two weeks. If not paid then, further negotiations will be useless. It will do you no good to hunt for us. You could not unearth us in a year. We mean business."

THE MOUNTAIN WOLVES."

Monckton read it aloud to the group of astonished cowboys.

"Seems to bear out the statements of the intercepted letter," said Monckton with a puzzled and anxious look. "That letter said an effort would be made by Garland to obtain ransom money for Paul, and that the attempt would be made under the outlaw cloak."

"But Zeke says he knows the feller that sent the arrier!" interposed one of the cowboys.

In his excitement Monckton had already quite forgotten that.

He turned to Zeke and again applied the inquisitorial pump.

Zeke had scarcely recovered from the shock given him by the sudden appearance of the horseman; but he replied promptly enough and stuck to his original statements with rigid pertinacity.

"And you can lead us to the place where they are now holding Paul?"

"I kin!"

"Mount one of the led horses, then, and proceed. Swallow some of this dried beef! I can see that you are hungry. It was careless of me not to order a warm breakfast for you while we stood here talking! You must pardon me. My anxiety made me forget the demands of hospitality. It was an inexcusable piece of thoughtlessness. We must move now, and perhaps the beef will answer!"

"I ain't much hungry!" protested Zeke, as he tore off and devoured huge slices of the beef. "This hyer'll do fu'st rate."

He mounted the pony offered him and boldly piloted the little command in the direction he had pointed out.

"He was there las' night, Mr. Monckton. They might 'a' moved him sence I run away. Got skeered at that you know. But I think he's there!"

"If he isn't!" said Monckton, settling himself in the heavy saddle. "If we find him gone there may be a trail. At any rate we can back track! It isn't too late yet to strike Garland's men at Cottonwood Falls. I can't drive the idea from my head that they're at the bottom of the whole affair, and have in some way drawn Gabe Taylor into their scheme!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

HUCKLEBERRY AS A HERO.

HUCKLEBERRY darted with seeming aimlessness down the valley, after leaving Gladys. The basin was swarming with excited outlaws and their voices could be heard to the front as well as to the rear. But there was really method in this madness.

From the open door of his prison, the previous day, he had obtained a momentary glimpse of a rift in the line of encircling hills. His active mind at once grasped the idea that this must be a canyon or bed of a stream cutting its way through the walls of solid granite.

The way by which he had entered was now barred. It would be utterly impossible to scale the cliffs without the aid of ropes, and the assistance of strong and friendly arms. Only one route lay open. That was the canyon. And to make even that available, he must reach it in advance of his pursuers.

No doubt there were already sentinels posted there. If so, he must in some way

manage to evade them. If the aroused outlaws succeeded in gaining the opening first, however, and filling it with a cordon of armed men, escape was out of the question. He might be able to keep out of their hands while the darkness lasted, but he could not hope to when day came.

It was these thoughts that gave wings to his feet, and summoned all the energies of his being. Heedless of bowlders and bruises, forgetful of racked muscles and stiffened limbs, he bounded on. And behind and around him rose and fell the sounds of pursuit, like a clamorous and surging sea.

Through the semi-darkness he saw the frowning walls rising before him. The basin was not large, and he was nearing the lower end of it. As these walls pressed nearer and nearer, and then seemed to loom above him, he halted to gain some idea of his position, and determine upon a plan of action.

It would be rank folly to continue on, without purpose or plan. The echoes of cries and calls swelled and sunk alternately. Evidently the outlaws were baffled, and racing around like a pack of hounds off the scent. There could be no doubt, though, that their next circling sweep would bring them dangerously near; and Huckleberry knew that he must think and act quickly.

It was a self-evident proposition that if the rift in the mountain barrier had been channeled by a stream, that stream had its rise in the valley, and was fed by the rainfall and snows from the surrounding slopes. Naturally it would trend from higher ground to lower; and in keeping near the edge of the hills one would, in passing around the valley, be compelled to cross it.

Having determined this point, Huckleberry bore to the right, and set out again at a rapid gait. His reasoning proved to be correct, and in less than ten minutes he splashed into the stream.

"Waters o' Babylon!" he gasped, retreating and shivering. "Never figgered out the algebraic x in so short a time before. That water's as cold as store ice in the summer time. Gives me the ager!"

He dropped his hand into it to determine the direction of the current, and then listened intently to the sounds of pursuit.

"They got the gal awhile ago, I think, when they give that yell, an' now they're a-comin' after yours truly. Seemed like a scaly trick to run off from her that way, an' I jes' can't help feelin' mean about it. But she was right, I calc'late. 'Twouldn't hev done no good fer us both to git took, and that's what would hev happened without a doubt. When I git out o' hyer, if I don't come back to storm this hornets' nest it'll be because they ain't any *men* in the country!"

He waded out into the ice-cold, but shallow stream, and followed the direction of the current. It did not take him long to reach the point where the torrent penetrated the hills. Here the waters leaped and foamed against the bowlders and the walls rose straight up like the sides of a building.

Huckleberry was pleased at this. The towering walls completely shut out the starlight and the dashing of the current drowned the noise of his movements.

His fear was that the outlaws might explore this passage by means of torches—their familiarity with the winding channel giving them great advantages in the way of speed. Then, too, he had no doubt that sentinels were posted along at intervals; and he constantly expected to hear the cry of "halt," followed by the spang of a rifle.

"But great gov'ner! I can't expect to git out o' hyer 'thout runnin' resks!" he muttered. "We can't live 'thout takin' constant resk. The ship sinks, the injine bu'sts its b'iler, the broncho pitches ye an' the policeman cracks your head. It's a world o' dangers an' uncertainties!"

He waded on, slowly, painfully and carefully, his body chilled and his feet feeling like ice-chunks.

His quick ear caught a suspicious sound and he became instantly as rigid and silent as the rocks about him.

He had almost stumbled on a couple of sentinels unawares. They were seated in a niche or little ledge against the face of one of the walls.

"Hist! Didn't ye hear somethin' splashin'?"

One of them leaned forward and peered into the gloom, as he put the question.

"Naw!" returned the other. "'Twas the water b'ilin' 'g'inst the rocks, er mebbe a fish jumpin'. 'Thar's trout in this crick, ye know!"

"But 'twas different frum them!" insisted the other, turning his head from side to side and listening intently. "Something broke loose in the camp awhile ago, an' mebbe 'twas the pris'ners got away. They mou't come this direction!"

"Blamed fools ef they did!" declared the other, who evidently did not wish to be disturbed. "They'd on'y git the'r heads shot off fer tryin' it. They couldn't git by hyer without us knowin' of it."

The more alert sentinel was not satisfied to thus take matters for granted. He slipped down from the ledge and dropped into the water.

"I'm goin' to 'vestigate a little anyhow. Git yer shooter ready, Bill, an' ef I holler come a-climbin'!"

Huckleberry shrunk silently against the rocky wall, claspin' the knife in his hand.

The sentinel waded cautiously out into the current, halted awhile to listen, and then advanced straight toward the fugitive, carefully feeling the surface of the rocks.

"Keep yer ears open, Bill, an' yer shooter ready. Ef they's anything hyer I'll jump it d'reckly!"

"Freezin' yer feet fer nothin'!" growled Bill, from his comfortable perch. "You'll shake the blessed night, so you will! Don't ketch me a-s'archin' after the rheumatiz that way when I ain't got to!"

The wader was now almost upon Huckleberry. In another moment his reaching hand would fall upon the little man's garments.

Huckleberry did not wait for that. His bony fist shot out, caught the sentinel fairly between the eyes, and the fellow dropped into the water with a startled howl.

Jonas leaped across his body and bounded recklessly down the stream.

"Shoot him!" yelled the fallen man, scrambling to his feet and dashing the water out of his mouth and eyes. "It's one o' the prisoners!"

The command was followed by the crack of a rifle and the ball flattened itself against the rocks just above Huckleberry's head.

Bill was now aroused, and he began to work the lever of his Winchester like a pump-handle. The balls whistled and zipped and whirr-ed, chipping pieces from the granite walls and striking the water with vicious "spats." The echoes of the reports made deafening and horrible music and the powder-flames, as they stabbed the darkness, resembled the javelins of lightning that are hurled from an overcharged and angry storm-cloud.

But there is nothing more uncertain than rifle-shooting in the gloom of a pitchy night. Huckleberry realized this; and bowing low, he hurried on at his best gait, heedless of the whistling balls. Many came dangerously near; one even penetrated the crown of his peaked, straw hat; but no shelter offered and he ran straight ahead. Then a bend in the canyon wall brought him safety.

"Come mighty near trimmin' my ha'r, that feller did!" he muttered, as he hurried on. "Wouldn't want to run another gantlet like that jes' now!"

The canyon walls widened away at this point and fringes of scrub began to appear. The starlight also sifted in, assisting the fugitive greatly.

When the canyon walls ended, as they did half a mile further down, Huckleberry left the stream and hastened into the security of the hills. He kept on for over an hour, then crept into a deep gorge, and awaited the coming of daylight.

His exertions after leaving the icy waters had driven the chill out of his blood and he was enabled to gain a little sleep and rest.

With the first blush of dawn he climbed to the top of the nearest hill for the purpose of reconnoitering. In the hurry and excitement of escape and flight he had forgotten to provide for the needs of the inner man and the gnawings of hunger now made him painfully aware of this oversight.

From the top of this hill he could see, off to the west, the semi-circular ridges that shut in the den of Mountain Wolves. Several miles to the eastward a smoke arose above

the rocky heights, spreading out like a huge umbrella as it ascended toward the clouds.

When he saw this, Huckleberry climbed down from his perch and started in that direction. The smoke might come from the camp-fire of friends or foes. Of that he could not determine, except by inspection. He believed, however, that the kindlers of the fire did not belong to Gabe Taylor's band. From what he had seen of them he judged that most of the outlaws were at their headquarters in the valley.

Three or four hours of scrambling across rocky ravines and defiles brought him to a point where he could look down upon the camp-fire. It was located in a grassy glade, on the banks of the stream that came from the canyon and at a point where the waters dashed down in a series of leaps or miniature cascades. Horses were picketed over the glade and the men lolling about the camp-fire and under the trees seemed to be cow-boys.

Huckleberry was convinced instantly that they were Garland's men. And he was right! After Garland's capture they had retreated to that point—Cottonwood Falls—and had remained there, not knowing what to do. They had searched long and earnestly for their missing employer and were now at a complete stand-still, hesitating and uncertain as to the course they ought to pursue. None among them had the qualifications for a leader, and they were therefore like an army without a commander.

Huckleberry descended into the glade and advanced boldly toward them. His appearance created a considerable amount of excitement and commotion. He could see that weapons were fingered nervously and anxious glances cast toward the hills behind him.

"I allow that you're Garland's men?" he said, as he came up, puckering his countenance into a smile and sweeping the circle of eager faces with his ferret-like eyes. "If you air, you're the men I'm a lookin' fur."

"Well, we air, stranger!" said one, assuming the duty of spokesman. "An' you're the chap that come along o' the feller that Garland said was Paul Monckton, er I'm mightily mistaken!"

Huckleberry laughed, in his droll way.

"Glad ye recognize me. Saves an' introduction, and proves that I don't belong to the gang o' outlaws that's hidin' over there. I'm the man, pardner; but whether the chap that was with me was Paul Monckton er Las Animas Luke I'm free to say I don't know.

"Tany rate he was captered, an' so was John Garland—likewise his darter!"

"Do you know where they air?" asked the spokesman, and the cowboys crowded about in their eagerness and anxiety.

"Pardner, I've been runnin' away from that place all night!" Huckleberry replied, launching at once into an account of his adventures.

"An' thar's a gang o' cut-throats that close?" howled the spokesman. "Boys, better put out that fire!"

"Don't!" Huckleberry insisted. "Keep it boomin' right along. A couple of us can reconnoiter the place to-day; and to-night we can crawl down them walls by means o' lariats. If you'll lemme I'll show you how it can be done. Then, if we don't jes' tear the linin' out o' that hornets' nest, it'll be because we don't know how to fight."

A cheer, wild, thrilling and exultant, greeted this speech; and Huckleberry knew that the men would follow him and stand by him to the bitter end.

CHAPTER XXXV.

PAUL MONCKTON'S RESCUE.

GLADYS GARLAND crouched, cowering and tremblingly, on the rocky slope, as Huckleberry raced away through the gloom. Her nerves were unstrung by the anxieties and excitements of the night; and her failure to escape, when escape seemed so certain, greatly depressed and weakened her. Heedless of the yells and calls she buried her face in her hands and gave expression to her disappointment in tears.

Yet she was keenly alive to the fact that deadly peril menaced the queer old man who was now making so brave and gallant a fight for liberty; and she prayed earnestly that he might succeed.

After a time she got up and walked slowly back toward the twinkling lights. She could hear the outlaws racing and crashing here and there. Their brutal curses sickened her. It seemed like tempting fate to thus return to her imprisonment. But she knew that she could not escape, now that the camp was aroused, and she preferred that they should find her in the vicinity of the cabins. It would puzzle them probably as to the direction taken by Huckleberry, and the presence of a crowd would render her less liable to insult.

Searching squads passed her two or three times, but she remained quiet until they had gone. As she reached the first cabin a great yell arose. She had been discovered, and a half-dozen of the Mountain Wolves crowded angrily about her. Their manner was so menacing that she drew back with a little cry of fright.

"What's the row?" demanded a stern voice and Taylor elbowed his way through the throng.

He stopped and stared frowningly at her, as she stood in the fan of light that came from the cabin door.

"Thought you would run away, eh?"

He advanced and laid his hand heavily on her shoulder.

"Oh, Mr. Taylor!"

Gladys uttered a scream and shrunk back as the fingers closed cruelly on her flesh.

"Do you know what I've a notion to do with you? I've a good mind to take you into the presence of your stiff-necked daddy and whip you until your blood dyes the floor!"

Taylor was in a terribly savage mood, and his eyes fairly glowed with anger.

"You've helped that rattle-headed old fool to get away, and if the boys don't succeed in stopping him with a bullet he'll be sure to make trouble for us!"

He dragged her roughly forward and shoved her into the room of the cabin from which she had so recently escaped.

"Oh, Mr. Taylor, is father here?" Gladys asked, pleadingly.

"He is, you hussy! And he'll stay here until I choose to let him go. If you had known that he is in the camp, I suppose you would have attempted to release him, too!"

"I certainly should have done so, Mr. Taylor."

Gladys's courage began to rise with her resentment.

The old crone, hearing the voices, hobbled into the room, and catching sight of Gladys, flew at her with a scream of rage.

"You'd choke me, would ye? You'd stuff a dirty rag into my mouth, hey? I'll tear yer eyes out for that!"

Taylor interposed, and hurled the virago against the wall.

She leaped to her feet, drew a knife, and rushed at him viciously.

"See here, mother," he cried, twisting the knife from her hand and hurling it through the doorway, "I'm not in a mood to stand much nonsense, just now! If you make another break like that I'll tie you up so that you can't move!"

"Sam'll put a bullet into you fer strikin' me" she shrieked.

"Bah! Slippery Sam knows me too well to try any little trick like that. Go into the other room and keep still. You've bothered me long enough."

The old creature shuffled away, muttering unintelligible sentences that were filled with vengeful wrath.

"A regular she-cat," said Taylor, as the door clanged behind her.

"You do not intend to leave me with her, Mr. Taylor? She would do me mortal injury if the opportunity presented."

"And she would make the opportunity," Taylor added. "I don't know but I ought to, for what you did to-night. It would serve you right. But I will have you taken to another house."

"Can I not see father first?" Gladys asked.

"No," rejoined Taylor, in deep anger. "You can't! It would please John Garland too well. He is a gentleman I have lately quit trying to please. I did enough of that, goodness knows, when I was playing the difficult role of the mutual friend. Now I laugh to see him groan and grind."

Gladys recoiled involuntarily, there were

such depths of malignant and fiendish cruelty revealed in the tones.

"Come," urged Taylor. "Unless you prefer to remain the balance of the night with that amiable old lady."

He drew Gladys after him, and hurried her into the adjoining building. Then he locked the door, placed the key in his pocket, and called a sentinel to watch over the house. Then he hurried off down the valley, to see how the search was progressing. The rattling shots that were fired at Huckleberry in the gloom of the canyon hastened his footsteps.

Thus left to her own gloomy thoughts, Gladys became a prey to the deepest sadness. The knowledge that her father was near her did not mitigate her misery. He was also a helpless prisoner. She had been led to think, by words dropped incautiously by the crone, that her father was held at some point beyond the valley; and when she had hastened away with Huckleberry, the attendant danger and excitement had kept her from questioning him upon that point.

With what anxiety she listened to the distant sounds of the pursuit. When the echoing reports of the rifle-shots came, she fully expected to hear the exultant yell announcing that Huckleberry had been slain. But it did not come, and the baffled cries rolled away toward the east.

Two or three hours later Taylor returned, hurled the door open and stalked in, striking a match as he entered.

"Get ready to go with me!" he commanded, holding the sputtering match above his head.

Gladys caught but a momentary view of his face in that flickering and uncertain light, but it was sufficient to show that it bore a baggard and anxious look.

"Huckleberry got away!" was her joyful and exultant thought.

"Where are you going to take me, now, Mr. Taylor?"

"Don't know as it'll matter much to you!" he replied, bluntly. "There will be fighting here before the week ends, or I miss my guess. Your worthy friend got away, Miss Gladys, and if he's what I think he is, he'll turn the mountains over in an effort to crush us. It will take an army to do it, though; and if he makes the effort the air hereabouts will be blue with bullets."

"I don't want you killed yet awhile, and so I'm going to send you into shelter until the storm blows over. As for your father, he can stay and take his chances with the rest of us. A bullet won't hurt him any worse than it will me!"

He bade her follow him; and hastened away among the buildings and toward the northern ridge.

A group of men were in waiting at this point, and he consigned Gladys to their care.

"Hurry through and get back as quick as you can. Ishmael is now sending out scouts to watch the forces in the vicinity and bring us word of any movement they make. We may need every man we can muster, and probably will before the thing ends. Tell the boys to keep their eyes and ears open!"

He turned back; and the men began slowly to climb the hill.

After a little they entered the cave by which Gladys and Paul had been taken when Garland was captured. When it ended, they proceeded through the tortuous tunnel, emerging finally on the terrace.

From this they descended into the valley below. Here they mounted horses that had been placed in waiting, binding Gladys upon one, and hurried off through the hills.

It was almost daylight when they halted. They were in a sort of *cul de sac*, hidden by bushes, and before them was a stout cabin.

As they approached this the horses snorted violently and endeavored to dash away.

"What in thunder's the matter with the animals?" questioned one, as he wrenched at his prancing steed. "A feller would think they was mountain lions in that house!"

"They is mountain wolves!" suggested another; and his companions roared at this elegant pun.

"Hello, in there!" yelled the first speaker. "Keepin' a deaf an' dumb asylum? We've been roarin' 'round out hyer 'nuff to wake the dead!"

There was a grumbling, shuffling sound,

the flame of a lamp pierced the darkness, and two men came out of the house.

Then—

"Hands up or we'll bore you with Winchester!"

It was the loud, stern voice of Colonel Miles Monckton.

A threatening circle of men leaped from the surrounding bushes; there was a suggestive and warning chorus of clicking gunlocks; and the astounded outlaws saw by the light falling through the window that they were hemmed in by gleaming gun-barrels.

"We'll down the first man that moves or attempts to touch a weapon!" cried Monckton, meaningly. "Go up and get their weapons, Zeke. You're entitled to the honor of this surprise."

Gladys's amazement was so great that she was speechless. She regained her tongue, as Zeke advanced from the ranks of the threatening men.

"It is I, Mr. Monckton—Gladys Garland. You know me."

"Yes; we know that you are there, Miss Garland. But don't move, please, until those men have been disarmed. It may create confusion, and we've got them covered now so they can't get away."

"Durn ye!" hissed one of the men who had come out of the cabin, as Zeke proudly and fearlessly advanced. "I've a notion to plug you anyhow. We never 'lowed you'd play us a trick like that. We thought you was wanderin' 'round some-eres huntin' berries er somethin'!"

Zeke drew back in a startled way.

"Lift a finger against the boy and we'll make a sieve out of you!" exclaimed Monckton. "Go ahead, Zeke. He knows better than to try anything of the kind."

Sounds of thumping and questioning calls came at the same time from the cabin.

The prisoner knew that something of importance was occurring outside and he was trying to obtain an explanation of it.

Monckton looked toward the open door and it could be seen plainly that he wanted to hurry in there. But he controlled this natural desire and calmly watched Zeke as the latter disarmed the outlaws.

When their weapons had been removed, Monckton commanded two of his men to advance and bind the scoundrels. This was quickly accomplished. They dared not resist, and lariats were plentiful.

Then, and not until then, did Monckton hurry toward the cabin.

He halted on the threshold, turned about and told one of his men to unbind Gladys.

"Pardon me, Miss Garland! My anxiety must be my excuse. How I could overlook such a matter is past my comprehension. I will be out in just one minute!"

Monckton, as is known, had no great love for Gladys, but he prided himself on being a gentleman and this oversight and selfish thoughtlessness nettled him greatly.

"Oh, father, is that you?" came a voice from one corner of the room.

Monckton raised the lamp from the table and advanced tremblingly.

Paul was lying there on a bundle of leaves, pale and anxious. His hands and feet were bound.

Monckton drew a knife and severed the bonds; and Paul staggered stiffly and heavily to his feet.

As the lamp-light streamed over his haggard features, a glad cry came from the doorway and Gladys Garland rushed into the young man's arms.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE DROP OF THE CURTAIN.

HUCKLEBERRY's first act was to appease his raging hunger. Then he sent out scouts to watch all the avenues of approach to the camp at Cottonwood Falls, instructing them to capture and bring in any spies they might chance to see.

The bulk of the cowboys were to remain at the camp, keep the fire going and loll about as if no movement was contemplated.

Shortly after noon Huckleberry took one of the shrewdest of the men and set off on foot for the purpose of inspecting the hill-guarded home of the Mountain Wolves. By going on foot they were less liable to discovery. They could slip through shadowy ravines where a horse could not go and could

thus approach and climb, as they hoped, some peak or ridge overlooking the valley.

On the way they did not neglect to seek a route by which the entire force could be brought up.

They succeeded even better than they had anticipated. Before the afternoon was half-spent they had partially encircled the valley containing the camp of the outlaws and climbed to the top of the southern ridge. The route was precipitous, but they worked their way slowly up by the aid of lariats and at last had the supreme satisfaction of looking down in safety into this den of wolves.

"A feller might hunt these hyer mountains over and then if he stumbled onto this place it would on'y be by acksident!" said Huckleberry, with glee. "If you recollect, pardner, this circle o' hills looks jes' like one big hill, when you're off a ways. That's what makes the place so safe. Nobody would ever s'picion, unless he tuck the trouble to climb to the top, that the big hill, as it looks, has got a hole in it fer all the worl' like the crater o' a dead volcaner."

"An' as fer the crick, they ain't many men would think o' goin' up it. When you look at it from below you'd be shore to judge that it was chuck-full o' rocks an' rapids and waterfalls that a mountain sheep couldn't git over. It looks to be spring-fed an' is altogether as deceivin' a branch as I ever run across."

"I hain't any doubt but them fellers takes the'r hosses in an out o' this valley through that crick, an' yit you can't see a huff-print at the pint where it comes out o' the canyon. The water washes 'em all away."

"It's a hornets' nest, pardner, and it's hung on the topmost limb! It's a-goin' to take climbin' an' clubbin' to git it down."

Having relieved his mind by this expression of opinion, Huckleberry began a careful search with his eyes for such ledges and terraces as seemed to offer the best facilities for descending into the valley.

This point settled, and the surroundings mentally photographed, he stretched out in the shade of the rock by the side of the cowboy, and watched the movements taking place below.

The camp was rather quiet. Men walked leisurely about, heavily armed, as if in expectation of an attack, but there seemed to be little excitement.

After studying the scene until he believed he could recall and locate every cabin, rock, crevice and bush, Huckleberry signified his desire to retrace his way.

The descent was made in the same careful, cautious manner as the ascent, and the return journey was a repetition of the crouching and crawling movements that had brought them there.

When they reached the camp at Cottonwood Falls it was dark. The cowboys were in a high state of excitement. The scouts sent out in the morning had just returned, bringing two prisoners. They were the spies that Ishmael had detailed to watch Garland's men. They had been detected and caught sneaking about in the vicinity of the camp.

Huckleberry was elated, and at once subjected them to a rigid examination. They were stubborn and unwilling witnesses at first, but finding that their stubbornness was likely to bring upon them severe punishment, they opened their mouths and talked quite freely.

There were twenty-one men, they said, belonging to the outlaw organization known to the reader as the Mountain Wolves. This included Gabe Taylor, who was, in reality, superior in rank to Captain Ishmael.

Of this number, two were with Paul Monckton at the secret rendezvous in the mountains, and three had started for the same place, with Gladys. Two men were on duty as sentinels at the mouth of the tunnel and two in the canyon. This left ten men actually in the valley, counting Taylor and Captain Ishmael.

"I thought Taylor claimed to be on'y a sort o' trader an' hunter!" said Huckleberry, with a queer twinkle in his little eyes. For some reason he seemed greatly interested in Taylor.

"'Twar' jest a blind!" said the spy. "He had a little job he wanted to play along o' the ranchmen. A piece o' revenge like,

An' he didn't want Zeke to know till he got ready to tell 'im, that his daddy belonged to the Wolves.

"An' then he c'u'd do more good that-away. He kept us posted, Taylor did; an' he's a cute 'un. Never a stage rolled through these hyer mountains with money in it that he didn't know 'bout.

"An' he also planned and led the 'tack on the Boomer City Bank las' year, which brought us in over thirty thousan', an' he worked the racket that piled a lot o' U. P. cars into a canyon the year before. That was a haul, that was; an' it jes' panned out a cart-full o' dollars.

"I couldn't begin to tell you the half o' Taylor's tricks; but he's a rattlin' good 'un!"

"That U. P. racket, as you call it, is what brung me hyer!" said Huckleberry, with his queer, puckery smile.

"The—the— What? Thunder! you don't say so!"

The spy stammered, trembled, and closed his mouth in a way that showed he realized he had been talking too glibly.

When the darkness became dense enough to completely conceal their movements, Jonas led Garland's cowboys forward. The horses were left picketed in the glade and one man remained to watch them and feed the deceptive fire.

The darkness, while it shielded, also hindered their movements and they did not reach the ridge on the southern side of the valley until long after midnight. Then it took two hours of hard and constant work for the men to scale the cliff-like walls.

But it was accomplished at last, and after a short rest the cautious descent into the valley was commenced. As they stood at the base of the cliffs, within the basin, the gray dawn began to break faintly over the eastern hills.

"Now, forward! Slow and steady! Surround the cabins and down every man that won't surrender."

Huckleberry whispered the words, and the cowboys moved forward in obedience to the command, driving in their midst the bound gagged spies.

That fight I will not attempt to detail.

In every sense it was a surprise, and Garland's cowboys were completely and overwhelmingly victorious.

The outlaw sentinels got away, as did some of those who were in the valley. Three of the Mountain Wolves, refusing to surrender, were slain—among them Captain Ishmael. Slippery Sam escaped, with his mother.

"These air the men I wanted!" exclaimed Huckleberry, pointing to the bound forms of Scribbler and Gabe Taylor. "I didn't expect to find Mr. Forger this trip, but he's welcome to my society now as much as he would hev been later."

A series of ringing cheers came from the canyon. Monckton's men were advancing, their rifles gleaming in the first rays of the rising sun.

They had visited the camp at Cottonwood Falls, and the lonely sentinel had informed them of what was going on. Forcing one of the prisoners to pilot them, they hurried up the stream, reaching the valley too late to be of actual service, but just in time to join in the general rejoicing.

Monckton led his men, the old-time cheery smile on his florid face! Behind him came Paul and Gladys.

His feelings had undergone a great change in the last twenty-four hours. The revelations made by Paul and Gladys had opened his eyes as to Taylor's duplicity and convinced him of the criminality of the foolish hate he had held against Garland.

Garland, also, was now ready to advance more than half-way in an effort at reconciliation; and the meeting between these men who had been, until now, such bitter enemies, was thoroughly cordial and sincere. It revived and recemented the almost forgotten friendship of earlier and better years.

And perhaps the happiest man on earth that morning was Paul Monckton—also known as Las Animas Luke.

The reasons that had induced him to attempt the latter role will be stated as briefly as possible.

He realized that Gabe Taylor was playing his father and Garland against each other. Yet he could not make his father credit this,

though he had attempted it time and again. He was also convinced that Taylor really was an outlaw, and believed that, if he could unmask the scoundrel, the enmity between the ranchmen would cease, as a consequence, and all objections to his union with Gladys be removed.

After being dragged from the minister's residence he had been taken, with Gladys, into the foot-hills, as the reader already knows. When the columns of smoke were seen ascending on the mountain-side, Gladys was sent on with a single guard and the party advanced toward the mountain, taking him with them.

He was lashed to a pony, that, in going down a declivity, slipped and fell. The fall snapped the cord that bound him, and he dashed wildly away into the undergrowth. He was pursued, but managed to escape.

In an inner pocket he had a concealed derringer; and while wandering around, seeking for a way out of the hills, came suddenly upon Gladys and her drunken guard, as the latter was leaning forward to compel her to drink to his success.

Paul shot the wretch. Gladys's horse became frightened and dashed away with her before he could reveal himself. He followed, calling to her and shouting; then climbed to the top of a hill, from which point he saw her meet and ride away with her father.

As he sat there on the hill-top the plan, which he afterward carried out, at once took shape in his mind.

He visited the distant railway town for the purpose of procuring what he considered an adequate disguise. After making the changes in his clothing and appearance, he emerged from his room, to meet Huckleberry, who was in an adjoining room.

Huckleberry was a detective, whose many years in the business had so habituated him to disguising his words and manners, that his dialect and eccentricities had almost become second-nature.

The old detective soon saw that Luke might be made a valuable aid and he sought an acquaintance. Luke, convinced of the detective's honesty, consented to join him, but conceived it best not to take Huckleberry too far into his confidence. So he did not tell his detective associate who he really was, but gave the name of Las Animas Luke, backing it with a plausibly story of a hunt for a lost woman.

With Jonas he visited the Monckton Ranch, hoping for an interview with his father. He intended to let his father know that he had regained his liberty, and to tell him that he was going away for a while. He believed this would prevent a hostile meeting between Monckton and Garland. His father was absent, and he did not wish to take the cowboys into his confidence.

His visit to the Garland Ranch was made with the hope that Garland would be away also, and he might obtain a short interview with Gladys.

Failing to see either his father or Gladys, he wrote them letters, riding away from Huckleberry in the night that he might place them for delivery in the hands of honest Zeke Taylor.

Gabe Taylor came home before Zeke could perform this task, discovered the letters, and told Zeke he was going to the ranches and would see that they got into the proper hands.

The letter to Gladys was destroyed. As for the other, the eminent talents of Scribbler were called into play, and Monckton received the forged letter, purporting to come from Paul, which sent him a second time into the foot-hills.

When Paul, in the disguise of Las Animas Luke, was retaken by the outlaws, his disguises and handsome clothing were stripped from him, and he was arrayed in the cast-off garments of some member of the road-raider band.

Little remains to be told.

Jonas Huckleberry took his prisoners to the places where they were most wanted and they were duly tried for their crimes. Joseph Whitelaw, alias Gabe Taylor, and the forger known as Scribbler, were both given life sentences at hard labor. The other members of the outlaw gang received their dues—shorter terms.

Paul Monckton and Gladys Garland are

happily married. Zeke Taylor, honest, industrious, contented and useful, makes his home with them, and Jim Congdon is the foreman of their cowboys.

The rival ranchmen are rivals no longer. Their ranches are now consolidated, and happier homes do not exist anywhere than those of our friends, as, surrounded by grazing herds, they smile at the azure sky from the great Colorado ranges.

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